

The WIZARDS OF ODD

COMIC TALES OF FANTASY

Terry
PRATCHETT

Douglas
ADAMS

and
many others

EDITED BY PETER HAINING



THE WIZARDS OF ODD

COMIC TALES OF FANTASY

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GREAT IRISH STORIES OF THE SUPERNATURAL

GREAT IRISH TALES OF THE UNIMAGINABLE

GREAT IRISH TALES OF HORROR

Sport that wrinkled Care derides,
And Laughter holding both his sides.

Come, and trip it as ye go
On the light fantastic toe ...

--John Milton

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

As a child I once lay awake for hours half-hoping to see a Dufflepud. Remember them? They were supposed to look rather like mushrooms, bounced around like footballs and were always agreeing with each other in loud voices. One person who *did* see them called them, simply, ‘the funnies’.

The Dufflepuds were not just amusing, though: they did things that stuck in the imagination. They washed up plates and knives *before* dinner because, they said, that saved them having to do them afterwards. They planted *boiled* potatoes so that they were ready for eating when they were dug up. And there was also the time when a cat got into a dairy and began lapping up the pails of milk. What did the Dufflepuds do? They didn’t shoo the cat out, of course—they moved all the *milk*.

If any readers are still puzzled, let me remind them. The Dufflepuds were just one of C. S. Lewis’ magical creations in his book that no child should miss or neglect to reread as an adult: *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. It is a classic, the book that introduced me to humorous fantasy fiction more than forty years ago and to which I have had good reason to be grateful ever since.

Another episode of comic fantasy, this time from the cinema, remains equally vivid in my mind although I was an adult when I saw it. It was a moment of genius by that multitalented writer and director, Woody Allen. The movie was a kind of futuristic satire on sex, and the episode in question concerned a mad scientist who had created a huge, mobile female breast. In the best tradition of horror films and ‘B’ movies, the breast had broken free from the scientist’s laboratory and was crushing everything that got in its way. But good old Woody found the solution to the marauding mammary: he brought its ravages to a dramatic end by trapping it in the cup of a giant bra! For those who don’t remember the title, the picture was called *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask* (1972).

Although these experiences happened to me at very different periods of my life, they have something very fundamental in common. They are linked by

what C. S. Lewis described as the key to the fantasy story—'an arresting strangeness'.

Which brings me to what I believe is perhaps the best argument for the appeal of fantasy fiction in general and humorous fantasy in particular. In all such stories the reader will encounter people, places, occurrences and creatures that, according to normal standards or scientific explanations, should not exist. *That* is what stimulates the imagination. And the degree to which the stimulation captures the reader's mind determines the success or failure of the genre.

It was another of the masters of fantasy, Professor J. R. R. Tolkien, who remarked that the object of fantasy is to fill the reader with 'awe and wonder'. If we add to this the words 'and to amuse', then we have a pretty good definition of humorous fantasy and certainly of the aim of the stories in this collection.

Like all literary genres, comic fantasy has various subdivisions, and in this book I have tried to arrange the stories under three headings which divide the categories as clearly as I have been able to manage. Firstly, 'Wizards and Wotsits'. These are all tales of magic and the supernatural in which neither works quite as it should. The second section, 'Swords and Sorcery', actually evolved from one of the oldest of all literary forms, with its antecedents in the ancient Greek legends and Scandinavian sagas. This brand of heroic fantasy has today undergone something of an upheaval: the heroes have become a lot more fallible, their quests rather less glamorous and their adversaries...well, find out all about that for yourself.

The 'Space Opera' is the last and most recent development in humorous fantasy. Space travel is generally regarded as such a highly technical and scientific pursuit that it seems almost profane to make fun of it—yet that is precisely what some very distinguished SF writers have done, with the result that the astronauts and aliens who appear in the last third of the book are neither supermen nor superintelligences from other worlds, of the kind who, in a host of books from the turn of the century onwards, have been trying to show man the folly of his ways in something approaching a messianic crusade!

Whenever I find myself reading stories like these, I am reminded of a couple of lines from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a work which has, directly and indirectly, been very influential on writers in the genre. They are lines spoken by the ubiquitous Mad Hatter: 'Up above the world you fly,' he remarks with all the seeming knowledge of personal experience, 'Like a tea tray in the sky.' It is not just tea trays that the writers of fantasy fiction have wrought for our imagination, but an absolute flotilla of craft, from H. G. Wells' ungainly Martian tripods to Doctor Who's improbable Tardis!

There is no doubt that the current popularity of humorous fantasy owes a great deal to two of my contributors, Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams. The other writers have all made important contributions, but Pratchett and Adams have become famous *specifically* as comic writers. I am therefore especially pleased that both so readily agreed to contribute to this book and provided what are to date the only short stories about their best-known creations: the Discworld moving through space on the backs of four elephants supported by a giant turtle, and the Hitch-Hiker's Guide charting the unlikely geography of the galaxy—two more examples of 'arresting strangeness' if ever I read them. Furthermore, both authors have revised their landmark stories for this, their first anthology appearance.

The Wizards of Odd represents, I believe, some of the best comic fantasy writing of the past one hundred years. It is not definitive—a volume three times the size would be needed to encompass all the contributors to the genre—but it is fully representative. And each story will, I hope, cause the reader to echo another line by Lewis Carroll: "'Curiouser and curiouser,'" said Alice.'

PETER HAINING,

Boxford, Suffolk.

WIZARDS AND WOTSITS

Stories of Cosmic Absurdity



THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Terry Pratchett

The comic fantasy genre is today dominated by Terry Pratchett whose series of eighteen Discworld novels, which he began writing in 1983 with The Colour of Magic, are one of the publishing phenomena of the last decade. Each new title automatically becomes a bestseller as it is published, and the books have also been translated into eighteen languages, generated a host of spin-off merchandising, are soon to become a major Granada TV serial, and, with the exception of J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, have probably done more to popularise fantasy fiction than any other series.

Where Pratchett differs from Tolkien, however, is that all his stories are outlandishly funny. Discworld is a place of magic which rests on the back of four giant elephants who in turn stand on the shell of a gargantuan turtle ('sex unknown'), journeying through starry infinity. It is peopled with bizarre characters, a number of whom have emerged as the novels progressed to be the most popular with readers. They include the hopeless wizard, Rincewind; the venerable witch, Granny Weatherwax; the orangutan Librarian of Unseen University; Death, who speaks in capital letters and rides a white horse called 'Binky'; and, especially, Luggage, a wooden chest with multiple legs who has been described as half faithful companion and half psychotic killer.

Terry Pratchett (1948—) has admitted that his interest in fantasy was influenced by reading Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows while he was still a schoolboy in his home town of Beaconsfield. He began writing stories soon afterwards, and at 13 became one of that select band of writers to have had their first story published while still in their teens—in Pratchett's case a little comic yarn about the commercialisation of heaven and hell, 'The Hades Business', which was published in Science Fantasy magazine in 1961. He was subsequently a reporter on the Bucks Free Press and then for eight years Press Officer for the Central Electricity Generating Board before the success of the Discworld novels enabled him to become a full-time writer.

‘Theatre of Cruelty’ is an important story in several respects. It is to date the only Discworld short story Pratchett has written, and has only previously appeared in W. H. Smith’s free magazine, Bookcase, in the July/August 1993 edition where it was published in a shortened form and not even mentioned on the front cover! For this, its very first appearance in a book, ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ has been especially restored by the author to its original length. The story is a gem of cosmic absurdity which sets the standard for all those that are to follow. . .

* * * *

It was a fine summer morning, the kind to make a man happy to be alive. And probably the man *would* have been happier to be alive. He was, in fact, dead.

It would be hard to be deader without special training.

‘Well, now,’ said Sergeant Colon (Ankh-Morpork City Guard, Night Watch), consulting his notebook, ‘so far we has cause of death as a) being beaten with at least one blunt instrument, b) being strangled with a string of sausages and c) being savaged by at least two animals with big sharp teeth. What do we do now, Nobby?’

‘Arrest the suspect, sarge,’ said Corporal Nobbs, saluting smartly.

‘What suspect, Nobby?’

‘Him,’ said Nobby, prodding the corpse with his boot. ‘I call it highly suspicious, being dead like that.’

‘But he’s the victim, Nobby. He was the one what was *killed*.’

‘Ah, right. So we can get him as an accessory, too.’

‘Nobby—’

‘He’s been drinking, too. We could do him for being dead and disorderly.’

Colon scratched his head. Arresting the corpse offered, of course, certain advantages. But...

‘I reckon,’ he said slowly, ‘that Captain Vimes’ll want this one sorted out. You’d better bring it back to the Watch House, Nobby.’

‘And then can we eat the sausages, sarge?’ said Corporal Nobbs.

* * * *

It wasn’t easy, being the senior policeman in Ankh-Morpork, greatest of cities of the Discworld.¹ There were probably worlds, Captain Vimes mused in his gloomier moments, where there weren’t wizards (who made locked room mysteries commonplace) or zombies (murder cases were really *strange* when the victim could be the chief witness) and where dogs could be relied on to do nothing in the night time and not go around chatting to people. Captain Vimes believed in logic, in much the same way as a man in a desert believed in ice—i.e., it was something he really needed, but this just wasn’t the place for it. Just once, he thought, it’d be nice to *solve* something.

He looked at the blue-faced body on the slab, and felt a tiny flicker of excitement. These were *clues*. He’d never seen proper clues before.

‘Couldn’t have been a robber, captain,’ said Sergeant Colon. ‘The reason being, his pockets were full of money. Eleven dollars.’

‘I wouldn’t call that full,’ said Captain Vimes.

‘It was all in pennies and ha’pennies, sir. I’m amazed his trousers stood the strain. And I have cunningly detected the fact he was a showman, sir. He had some cards in his pocket, sir. “Chas. Slumber, Children’s Entertainer”.’

‘I suppose no one saw anything?’ said Vimes.

‘Well, sir,’ said Sergeant Colon helpfully. ‘I told young Corporal Carrot to find some more witnesses.’

‘You asked *Corporal Carrot* to investigate a murder? All by himself?’ said Vimes.

The sergeant scratched his head.

‘Yessir. I said he ought to try to find a witness, sir. And he said to *me*, did I know anyone very old and seriously ill?’

And on the magical Discworld, there is always one *guaranteed* witness to any homicide. It’s his job.

Corporal Carrot, the Watch’s youngest member, often struck people as simple. And he was. He was incredibly simple, but in the same way that a sword is simple, or an ambush is simple. He was also possibly the most linear thinker in the history of the universe.

He had been waiting by the bedside of an old man, who’d quite enjoyed the company right up until just a few seconds ago, whereupon he’d passed on to whatever reward was due him. And now it was time for Carrot to take out his notebook.

‘Now I *know* you saw something, sir,’ he said. ‘You were there.’

WELL, YES, said Death. I HAVE TO BE, YOU KNOW. BUT THIS IS VERY IRREGULAR.

‘You see, sir,’ said Corporal Carrot, ‘as I understand the law, you are an Accessory After The Fact. Or possibly Before The Fact.’

YOUNG MAN, I *AM* THE FACT.

‘And I am an officer of the Law,’ said Corporal Carrot. ‘There’s got to be a law, you know.’

YOU WANT ME TO ... ER ... GRASS SOMEONE UP? DROP A DIME ON SOMEONE? SING LIKE A PIGEON? NO. NO ONE KILLED MR SLUMBER. I CAN’T HELP YOU THERE.

‘Oh, I don’t know, sir,’ said Carrot, ‘I think you have.’

DAMN.

Death watched Carrot leave, ducking his head as he went down the narrow stairs of the hovel.

NOW THEN, WHERE WAS I...

‘Excuse *me*,’ said the wizened old man in the bed, ‘I happen to be 107, you know. I haven’t got all day.’

AH, YES. CORRECT.

Death sharpened his scythe. It was the first time he’d ever helped the police with their enquiries. Still, everyone had a job to do.

Corporal Carrot strolled easily around the town. He had a Theory. He’d read a book about Theories. You added up all the clues, and you got a Theory. Everything had to fit.

There were sausages. Someone had to buy sausages. And then there were pennies. Normally only one sub-section of the human race paid for things in pennies.

He called in at a sausage maker. He found a group of children, and chatted to them for a while.

Then he ambled back to the scene of the crime in the alley, where Corporal Nobbs had chalked the outline of the corpse on the ground (colouring it in, and adding a pipe and a walking stick and some trees and bushes in the background—people had already dropped 7p in his helmet). He paid some attention to the heap of rubbish at the far end, and then sat down on a busted barrel.

‘All right...you can come out now,’ he said, to the world at large. ‘I didn’t know there were any goblins left in the world.’

The rubbish rustled. They trooped out—the little man with the red hat, the hunched back and the hooked nose, the little woman in the mob cap carrying the even smaller baby, the little policeman, the dog with the ruff around its neck, and the very small alligator.

Corporal Carrot sat and listened.

‘He made us do it,’ said the little man. He had a surprisingly deep voice. ‘He used to beat us. Even the alligator. That was all he understood, hitting things with sticks. And he used to take all the money the dog Toby collected and get drunk. And then we ran away and he caught us in the alley and started on the Judy and the baby and he fell over and—’

‘Who hit him first?’ said Carrot.

‘All of us!’

‘But not very hard,’ said Carrot. ‘You’re all too small. You didn’t kill him. I have a very convincing statement about that. So I went and had another look at him. He’d choked to death on something. What is this?’

He held up a little leather disc.

‘It’s a swizzle,’ said the little policeman. ‘He used it for the voices. He said ours weren’t funny enough.’

‘ “That’s the way to do it!” ’ said the one called Judy, and spat.

‘It was stuck in his throat,’ said Carrot. ‘I suggest you run away. Just as far as you can.’

‘We thought we could start a people’s co-operative,’ said the leading gnome. ‘You know...experimental drama, street theatre, that sort of thing.’

‘Technically it was assault,’ said Carrot. ‘But frankly I can’t see any point in taking you in.’

‘We thought we’d try to bring theatre to the people. Properly. Not hitting each other with sticks and throwing babies to crocodiles—’

‘You did that for *children*?’ said Carrot.

‘He said it was a new sort of entertainment. He said it’d catch on.’

Carrot stood up, and flicked the swizzle into the rubbish.

‘People’ll never stand for it,’ he said. ‘That’s not the way to do it.’

1 Which is flat and goes through space on the back of an enormous turtle, and why not...

HOW NUTH WOULD HAVE PRACTICED HIS ART UPON THE GNOLES

Lord Dunsany

If Terry Pratchett is today's undisputed master of comic fantasy, the man responsible for initiating the genre was a remarkable Irish eccentric, Lord Dunsany (1878—1957) who, almost a century ago, fathered the invented fantasy world in short story form', according to SF historian, Mike Ashley. While Pratchett is well known for his greying, Viking beard, black fedora hats and passion for fast motorcycles, his Irish-born forerunner was an even larger-than-life character in an age noted for its conformity. He was known as 'the worst dressed man in Ireland', sometimes wore two hats at a time, wrote all his stories, novels and plays with a quill pen, and described his hobbies as big-game hunting (in Africa) and cricket (in Ireland?).

It was at the start of the twentieth century that Dunsany first began to publish his vignettes of far distant worlds inhabited by wizards, demons and minor gods. Contemporary critics were puzzled by his collections—The Gods of Pegana (1905), The Sword of Welleran (1908) and The Book of Wonder (1912)—but they undeniably heralded an entirely new development in fantasy fiction, notable especially for Dunsany's use of humour and satire, and gradually his influence began to spread amongst readers and other writers. Today, the name of Lord Dunsany is regarded as synonymous with fantasy fiction, and comic fantasy in particular.

The tall, gangling aristocrat was born Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, but after becoming the 18th Baron Dunsany shortened the by-line on his stories and books. During his younger days he was a courageous soldier in the Boer War and First World War, and during World War Two made a famous escape from occupied Greece. Apart from his short stories, Dunsany also wrote a number of fantasy plays for the theatre and a sequence of popular fantastic novels in which good battled against evil including The Chronicles of Don Rodriguez (1922), The King of Elfland's Daughter (1924) and The Curse of the Wise Woman (1933). His reputation was further enhanced by his long series of 'tall stories' told by a clubman

named Jorkens whose fabulous exploits outdid even those of the legendary Baron Munchhausen. In a curious example of synergy with the Pratchett story, 'How Nuth Would Have Practised his Art Upon the Gnoles' was first published in a shortened form—in The Sketch magazine in 1911—and was not printed in full until it appeared in The Book of Wonder the following year. The comparison with Pratchett's story does not end there, for in it the reader will discover several of the same elements of cosmic absurdity that both men have drawn upon, albeit almost three quarters of a century apart...

* * * *

Despite the advertisements of rival firms, it is probable that every tradesman knows that nobody in business at the present time has a position equal to that of Mr Nuth. To those outside the magic circle of business, his name is scarcely known; he does not need to advertise, he is consummate. He is superior even to modern competition, and, whatever claims they boast, his rivals know it. His terms are moderate, so much cash down when the goods are delivered, so much in blackmail afterwards. He consults your convenience. His skill may be counted upon; I have seen a shadow on a windy night move more noisily than Nuth, for Nuth is a burglar by trade. Men have been known to stay in country houses and to send a dealer afterwards to bargain for a piece of tapestry that they saw there—some article of furniture, some picture. This is bad taste: but those whose culture is more elegant invariably send Nuth a night or two after their visit. He has a way with tapestry, you would scarcely notice that the edges had been cut. And often when I see some huge, new house full of old furniture and portraits from other ages, I say to myself, 'These mouldering chairs, these full-length ancestors and carved mahogany are the produce of the incomparable Nuth.'

It may be urged against my use of the word incomparable that in the burglary business the name of Slith stands paramount and alone; and of this I am not ignorant; but Slith is a classic, and lived long ago, and knew nothing at all of modern competition; besides which the surprising nature of his doom has possibly cast a glamour upon Slith that exaggerates in our eyes his undoubted merits.

It must not be thought that I am any friend of Nuth's, on the contrary such politics as I have are on the side of Property; and he needs no words from me, for his position is almost unique in trade, being among the very few that do not need to advertise.

At the time that my story begins Nuth lived in a roomy house in Belgrave Square: in his inimitable way he had made friends with the caretaker. The place suited Nuth, and, whenever anyone came to inspect it before purchase, the caretaker used to praise the house in the words that Nuth had suggested. 'If it wasn't for the drains,' she would say, 'it's the finest house in London,' and when they pounced on this remark and asked questions about the drains, she would answer them that the drains also were good, but not so good as the house. They did not see Nuth when they went over the rooms, but Nuth was there.

Here in a neat black dress on one spring morning came an old woman whose bonnet was lined with red, asking for Mr Nuth; and with her came her large and awkward son. Mrs Eggins, the caretaker, glanced up the street, and then she let them in, and left them to wait in the drawing-room amongst furniture all mysterious with sheets. For a long while they waited, and then there was a smell of pipe-tobacco, and there was Nuth standing quite close to them.

'Lord,' said the old woman whose bonnet was lined with red, 'you did make me start.' And then she saw by his eyes that that was not the way to speak to Mr Nuth.

And at last Nuth spoke, and very nervously the old woman explained that her son was a likely lad, and had been in business already but wanted to better himself, and she wanted Mr Nuth to teach him a livelihood.

First of all Nuth wanted to see a business reference, and when he was shown one from a jeweller with whom he happened to be hand-in-glove the upshot of it was that he agreed to take young Tonker (for this was the surname of the likely lad) and to make him his apprentice. And the old woman whose bonnet was lined with red went back to her little cottage in the country, and every evening said to her old man, 'Tonker, we must fasten the shutters of a night-time, for Tommy's a burglar now.'

The details of the likely lad's apprenticeship I do not propose to give; for those that are in the business know those details already, and those that are in other businesses care only for their own, while men of leisure who have no trade at all would fail to appreciate the gradual degrees by which Tommy Tonker came first to cross bare boards, covered with little obstacles in the dark, without making any sound, and then to go silently up creaky stairs, and then to open doors, and lastly to climb.

Let it suffice that the business prospered greatly, while glowing reports of Tommy Tonker's progress were sent from time to time to the old woman whose bonnet was lined with red in the laborious handwriting of Nuth. Nuth had given up lessons in writing very early, for he seemed to have some prejudice against forgery, and therefore considered writing a waste of time. And then there came the transaction with Lord Castlenorman at his Surrey residence. Nuth selected a Saturday night, for it chanced that Saturday was observed as Sabbath in the family of Lord Castlenorman, and by eleven o'clock the whole house was quiet. Five minutes before midnight Tommy Tonker, instructed by Mr Nuth, who waited outside, came away with one pocketful of rings and shirt-studs. It was quite a light pocketful, but the jewellers in Paris could not match it without sending specially to Africa, so that Lord Castlenorman had to borrow bone shirt-studs.

Not even rumour whispered the name of Nuth. Were I to say that this turned his head, there are those to whom the assertion would give pain, for his associates hold that his astute judgement was unaffected by circumstance. I will say, therefore, that it spurred his genius to plan what no burglar had ever planned before. It was nothing less than to burgle the house of the gnoles. And this that abstemious man unfolded to Tonker over a cup of tea. Had Tonker not been nearly insane with pride over their recent transaction, and had he not been blinded by a veneration for Nuth, he would have—but I cry over spilt milk. He expostulated respectfully: he said he would rather not go; he said it was not fair, he himself to argue; and in the end, one windy October morning with a menace in the air found him and Nuth drawing near to the dreadful wood.

Nuth, by weighing little emeralds against pieces of common rock, had ascertained the probable weight of those house-ornaments that the gnoles are

believed to possess in the narrow, lofty house wherein they have dwelt from of old. They decided to steal two emeralds and to carry them between them on a cloak; but if they should be too heavy one must be dropped at once. Nuth warned young Tonker against greed, and explained that the emeralds were worth less than cheese until they were safe away from the dreadful wood.

Everything had been planned, and they walked now in silence.

No track led up to the sinister gloom of the trees, either of men or cattle; not even a poacher had been there snaring elves for over a hundred years. You did not trespass twice in the dells of the gnoles. And, apart from the things that were done there, the trees themselves were a warning, and did not wear the wholesome look of those that we plant ourselves.

The nearest village was some miles away with the backs of all its houses turned to the wood, and without one window at all facing in that direction. They did not speak of it there, and elsewhere it is unheard of.

Into this wood stepped Nuth and Tommy Tonker. They had no firearms. Tonker had asked for a pistol, but Nuth replied that the sound of a shot ‘would bring everything down on us,’ and no more was said about it.

Into the wood they went all day, deeper and deeper. They saw the skeleton of some early Georgian poacher nailed to a door in an oak tree; sometimes they saw a fairy scuttle away from them; once Tonker stepped heavily on a hard, dry stick, after which they both lay still for twenty minutes. And the sunset flared full of omens through the tree trunks, and night fell, and they came by fitful starlight, as Nuth had foreseen, to that lean, high house where the gnoles so secretly dwelt.

All was so silent by that unvalued house that the faded courage of Tonker flickered up, but to Nuth’s experienced sense it seemed too silent; and all the while there was that look in the sky that was worse than a spoken doom, so that Nuth, as is often the case when men are in doubt, had leisure to fear the worst. Nevertheless he did not abandon the business, but sent the likely lad with the instruments of his trade by means of the ladder to the old green casement. And the moment that Tonker touched the withered boards, the silence that, though ominous, was earthly, became unearthly like the touch of

a ghou. And Tonker heard his breath offending against that silence, and his heart was like mad drums in a night attack, and a string of one of his sandals went tap on a rung of a ladder, and the leaves of the forest were mute, and the breeze of the night was still; and Tonker prayed that a mouse or a mole might make any noise at all, but not a creature stirred, even Nuth was still. And then and there, while yet he was undiscovered, the likely lad made up his mind, as he should have done before, to leave those colossal emeralds where they were and have nothing further to do with the lean, high house of the gnoles, but to quit this sinister wood in the nick of time and retire from business at once and buy a place in the country. Then he descended softly and beckoned to Nuth. But the gnoles had watched him through knavish holes that they bore in trunks of the trees, and the unearthly silence gave way, as it were with a grace, to the rapid screams of Tonker as they picked him up from behind—screams that came faster and faster until they were incoherent. And where they took him it is not good to ask, and what they did with him I shall not say.

Nuth looked on for a while from the corner of the house with a mild surprise on his face as he rubbed his chin, for the trick of the holes in the trees was new to him; then he stole nimbly away through the dreadful wood.

‘And did they catch Nuth?’ you ask me, gentle reader.

‘Oh, no, my child’ (for such a question is childish). ‘Nobody ever catches Nuth.’

HELL HATH NO FURY

John Collier

The figures of mythology who featured in Lord Dunsany's groundbreaking tales were evolved a step further by John Collier, the English-born writer whom some critics have described as the heir to the eccentric Irishman's mantle. Collier, however, was more intrigued by figures of evil, such as the devil and his fiendish henchmen and women, though he treated all with a sardonic wit. A collection of such stories, Fancies and Goodnights, won him the very first International Fantasy Award in 1952. Other tales by Collier of the same kind had already been collected as Green Thoughts (1932) and The Devil and All (1935), and a full-length novel, His Monkey Wife (1930), was hailed by Anthony Burgess as 'a minor classic'. When this story of an expatriate explorer who returns to America with his clever chimpanzee, Emily, who tricks him into marriage, was first published in the USA, it raised a storm of controversy and was in danger of being banned in certain states! After the furore had died down, however, more objective voices declared that the work was actually an allegory of twentieth-century man's need to be reconciled with wild nature—although it can equally be appreciated as a comic jeu d'esprit typical of both its time and its author.

Although John Collier (1901-1980) spent the early years of his life in England, in the mid-Thirties he settled in America where he earned his living writing Hollywood screenplays for such distinguished pictures as George Cukor's Sylvia Scarlett (1935), The African Queen directed by John Huston from C. S. Forester's novel (1952), and I Am a Camera produced by Henry Cornelius in 1955. However, he never lost his love of writing the kind of comic fantasies that had brought him to public attention—in particular those in which devils and demons intruded into the affairs of humanity. Frequently anthologised examples of these are 'Thus I Refute Beelzy' about the fate suffered by those who do not believe in a little boy's invisible playmate, and 'The Bottle Party' about the comic escapades of a genie who always gets his own way. 'Hell Hath No Fury' is in the same tradition, but is less well known. It was among the collection of stories

which won that prestigious fantasy award, so confirming the permanent place of comic fantasy in modern literature.

* * * *

As soon as Einstein declared that space was finite, the price of building sites, both in Heaven and Hell, soared outrageously. A number of petty fiends who had been living in snug squalor in the remoter infernal provinces, found themselves evicted from their sorry shacks, and had not the wherewithal to buy fresh plots at the new prices. There was nothing for it but to emigrate: they scattered themselves over the various habitable planets of our universe; one of them arrived in London at about the hour of midnight in the October of last year.

Some angels in like case took similar measures, and by a coincidence one of them descended at the same hour into the same northern suburb.

Beings of this order, when they take on the appearance of humans, have the privilege of assuming whichever sex they choose. Things being as they are, and both angels and devils knowing very well what's what, both of them decided to become young women of about the age of twenty-one. The fiend, as soon as he touched earth, was no other than Bella Kimberly, a brunette, and the angel became the equally beautiful Eva Anderson, a blonde.

By the essential limitation of their natures, it is impossible for an angel to recognise fiendishness on beholding it, and equally so for a fiend even to conceive the existence of angelic virtue. As a matter of fact, at such a meeting as now took place at Lowndes Crescent, St John's Wood, the angel is innocently attracted by what seems to her the superior strength and intensity of the fiendish nature, while the devil experiences that delicious interest that one feels in a lamb cutlet odorous upon the grill.

The two girls accosted one another, and each asked if the other knew of a suitable lodging-house in the neighbourhood. The similarity of their need caused them first to laugh heartily, and then to agree to become room-mates and companions of fortune. Bella suggested that it was perhaps too late to make respectable application for a lodging, therefore they spent the night strolling on Hampstead Heath, talking of how they would earn their livings,

and of what fun they would have together, and of love, and then of breakfast, which is not an unnatural sequel.

They had some poached eggs in the little Express Dairy in Heath Street, and afterwards found a pleasant room on the third floor of an apartment house in Upper Park Road. Then they went out in search of employment: Bella was soon taken on as a dancing instructress, and Eva, with a little more difficulty, secured a situation as harpist in a cinema orchestra.

Once they were settled thus, they began to enjoy themselves as girls do, chattering and giggling at all hours. It is true that some of the things Bella said made Eva blush from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, but she already loved her dark friend, and found her daring humour quite irresistible. They made amicable division of the chest of drawers, and shared the same bed, which no one thought was extraordinary, nor would if they had known them in their true characters, for nothing is more common than to find a fiend and an angel between the same pair of sheets, and if it was otherwise life would be hellishly dull for some of us.

Now there was living in this apartment house a young man scarcely older than Bella and Eva, who was studying to become an architect, and who had never known love, nor been put off for long by any imitation. His name was Harry Pettigrew, and his hair was a very medium colour, neither too dark nor too fair.

His means were very limited, and his room was on the topmost floor, but not so far above that inhabited by the two girls but he could hear their delicious giggling at that still hour when he should have been at his latest studies. He longed to go down and tap at their door and ask them what the joke was, but he was too shy.

However, when three such young people are in the same house, it is not long before they become acquainted: on one occasion Bella forgot to lock the bathroom door, and the reason for this must have been that in Hell there are no baths, and hence no bathrooms, and consequently no bathroom doors.

It was a Sunday; the young man himself was descending in a dressing-gown: there was a delicious little *contretemps*, in which, fortunately, he saw no

more than any decent young man would wish to see. All the same, he retreated in great confusion, for he had no notion of the wishes of decent young women. His confusion was so extreme, that he counted neither stairs nor landings in ascending, and, flinging open a door which he took to be his own, he discovered Eva in the third position of Muller's exercise for the abdominal muscles, and in nothing else at all.

Now angels, as every man knows, are, by virtue of their very innocence, or the simplicity of the celestial costume, sometimes far less conventionally modest than the squeakers of the darker sisterhood. Eva hastily but without panic threw a wrap about her shoulders: 'You look quite upset,' she said. 'There is no reason to be upset. Did you want anything?'

'No...' he said, '... I *did* not. In fact I came in by mistake. It is nice of you not to scream or be angry with me.'

They exchanged one or two more little civilities. In the end, Harry was emboldened to suggest a walk on the Heath. Before Eva could reply, Bella entered, and, not seeing him there, she burst out, with a giggle, 'Whatever do you think happened to *me*?' Then, catching sight of him, she subsided into a confusion doubly arch.

This took off a little from the exquisite naturalness of the other encounter, a service for which Harry was not as grateful as he might have been, had he known to what a quarter, and from what a quarter, his fancy was being inclined. The truth is, that where a fiend and an angel, both in female form, are seen by the same young man, in precisely the same illuminating circumstances, he will, fifty or fifty-five times out of a hundred, choose the angel, if he is a nice young man, and if he has time enough.

Therefore, when they were all three on Hampstead Heath that afternoon, Harry addressed Bella with very pleasant words, but with words only, while to Eva he accorded certain looks as well.

Bella was not very slow at putting two and two together. She had been looking forward to a long period of mortal sin with this attractive young man, and to flying off with his soul afterwards. The soul of an architect, especially if he is of strong Palladian tendencies, is well worth a handsome villa,

standing in two or three acres of well-laid-out grounds, in the most desirable residential quarter of Hell. You imagine this homeless fiend's mortification, against which could have been measured the fury of the woman scorned, since they were here resident in the same anatomy.

She saw every day that Harry was growing fonder of her blonde companion, and conceived the idea of adding a fourth to their party, in the shape of a young man nearly as swarthy as herself, whom she had met at the dancing-hall, and with whom she was already quite sufficiently familiar.

She represented to him that Eva was likely to inherit a large sum of money. This, and her blonde locks and guileless air, were quite enough for Master Dago, and all he asked was opportunity to come at her.

'It's no good just trying to do the sheik,' said Bella, 'for she's already soft and soppy on Harry Pettigrew, who should be my boy friend by rights. What you want, is to give him the idea she lets you: that'll make him sheer off quick enough, if I know his lordship.' It will be observed that Bella's speech was vulgar in the extreme: this is a very usual deficiency of fiends.

Her dancing-partner, whom she had made well acquainted with the stings of jealousy, soon found means to introduce them to Harry. For example, on one Sunday when they were all walking in the sylvan shades of Ken Wood, he had Bella fall behind with Harry on some pretext or other, and when he and Eva had gone ahead a turn or two of the winding pathway, he put his arm behind her, without touching her in the least (or he would have had a severe rebuke), but so that it should appear to Harry, when he rounded the bend, that his hastily withdrawn arm had been about her consenting waist.

Not only this, but he once or twice made a sudden movement, and appeared flustered, when Harry entered a room in which he and Eva had been left alone by his accomplice. He was not above making, when he heard his rival's step outside the door, a little kissing sound with his perjured lips. On one occasion, when Bella was away for the weekend, he went so far as to throw a sock in at Eva's window.

Here he overreached himself. Harry, returning with Eva from a walk, was so overcome by the sight of this sock that he could no longer suffer in silence,

but, first of all asking (as it were carelessly) whose sock that could be, he soon burst out with all the accumulated suspicions of the past few weeks, and had the infinite pleasure of hearing them denied frankly, emphatically, unmistakably and, above all, angelically.

A pretty little scene ensued, in which they discovered that their love partook of the nature of perfection. In fact, the only attribute that was wanting was completeness, which is recognised as being an essential by many of the ancient philosophers, several of the fathers of the Church, and by all young lovers. It is the nature of men to strive after perfection, and of angels to attain it: our young pair were true to type, and, after a little amicable discussion, it was agreed that they should endeavour to realise perfection in Eva's room that very night, when all the house was asleep. If perfection itself is insufficient for the censorious, such are reminded that in Heaven there is no marrying or giving in marriage, and among architectural students very little.

Now it so happened that Bella had returned that very afternoon, and had gone into conference with her accomplice to devise some bold stroke by which they might each achieve their impatient ends. At last they agreed on the boldest of all: Bella that very night was to visit Harry in his bedroom, and the swarthy dancing-man was to play the Tarquin in Eva's.

That night, at about the middle hour, they repaired to Hampstead. It was as black as pitch, no moon, a mist over the stars; no lights in the lodgers' rooms, for they were all asleep; no light in Harry's, because he was not there; no light in Eva's, because he was.

Bella, not knowing this, goes up to the top, finds him absent, and gets into his bed by way of a little surprise for him when he returns.

The dancing-man, making his entry a little later, gropes his way up the stairs, and, stopping at Eva's door, hears a murmuring within, which is in fact our young pair expressing to one another their great admiration of the perfection of perfection. He concludes he is a flight too low, goes higher, opens the door of Harry's room, and, all in the dark, seizes upon the waiting Bella, who, in high delight at his enthusiasm, lets down a losing battle in a very convincing way.

Several hours passed, in which the good enjoyed that happiness which is the reward of virtue, and the wicked that illusion of it that is the consolation of vice.

In the first grey of dawn, our good Harry made a very pretty speech of thanks to his charmer, in which he told her that she was an angel and had transported him to Heaven itself.

Bella and her companion, on the other hand, damned one another with more heat than grace. They were sufficiently realistic, however, to agree that a good illusion is better than nothing at all, and they resolved to perpetuate their error by seeking it in an eternity of darkneses, but at this, I believe, they were not particularly successful.

THE TWONKY

Henry Kuttner

Strange creatures with remarkable abilities have been a staple feature of fantasy fiction right back to the days of Mark Twain, Samuel Butler and, particularly, Lewis Carroll. 'The Twonky' is a witty story in this tradition by Henry Kuttner (1914—1958), a writer who greatly admired the imaginary worlds of Lewis Carroll and actually used the pen-name of 'Lewis Padgett' on several of his most notable works of comic fantasy. Such, indeed, was the case with this tale first published as by Padgett in 1942, about a creature which takes over a radiogram. It has since been described by historian Peter Nicholls as a classic of humorous Science Fiction, and also enjoys the distinction of being probably the first comedy fantasy to be made into a full-length movie, thereby securing Kuttner's reputation as another ground-breaking figure in the genre.

Curiously, Henry Kuttner's first published stories, in the mid-Thirties, were out-and-out horror yarns for Weird Tales, although he gained a more widespread recognition with a series of tongue-in-cheek tales about the film business of the future, with titles like 'Hollywood on the Moon' (1938), 'The Star Parade' (1938) and 'The Seven Sleepers' (1940). Following his marriage in 1940 to another popular fantasy writer, Catherine Moore, he embarked on a number of highly amusing fantasies, several of which acknowledged his debt to Lewis Carroll—including 'Mimsy Were the Borogroves', 'The Portal in the Picture' and the very successful Hogben series about a family of hill-billies. The best of these earned him comparison with Thorne Smith, then America's top-selling humorist.

In the early Fifties Kuttner moved to Los Angeles where he spent more time working on film scripts than on fantasy fiction—a source of deep regret to his many admirers when he died suddenly of an acute coronary, aged just 44. He had, however, lived long enough to see United Artists' screen adaptation of 'The Twonky' in 1952, starring Hans Conried, Billy Lynn and Gloria Blondell, in which a television set rather than a radiogram was the medium for the force that set out to control its owners' lives. This

screen version can be seen today as a precursor of Steven Spielberg's hugely successful 1982 movie, Poltergeist, although in its time the picture was regarded as a thinly disguised attack by Hollywood on television, the new medium which it feared and distrusted. Arch Oboler, the man who directed the movie and also adapted the screenplay from Henry Kuttner's story, was an appropriate, if not disinterested choice, having for some years been one of the nation's leading radio producers!

* * * *

The turnover at Mideastern Radio was so great that Mickey Lloyd couldn't keep track of his men. Employees kept quitting and going elsewhere, at a higher salary. So when the big-headed little man in overalls wandered vaguely out of a storeroom, Lloyd took one look at the brown dungaree suit—company provided—and said mildly, 'The whistle blew half an hour ago. Hop to work.'

'Work-k-k?' The man seemed to have trouble with the word.

Drunk? Lloyd, in his capacity as foreman, couldn't permit that. He flipped away his cigarette, walked forward and sniffed. No, it wasn't liquor. He peered at the badge on the man's overalls.

'Two-o-four, m-mm. Are you new here?'

'New. Huh?' The man rubbed a rising bump on his forehead. He was an odd-looking little chap, bald as a vacuum tube, with a pinched, pallid face and tiny eyes that held dazed wonder.

'Come on, Joe. Wake up!' Lloyd was beginning to sound impatient. 'You work here, don't you?'

'Joe,' said the man thoughtfully. 'Work. Yes, I work. I make them.' His words ran together oddly, as though he had a cleft palate.

With another glance at the badge, Lloyd gripped Joe's arm and ran him through the assembly room. 'Here's your place. Hop to it. Know what to do?'

The other drew his scrawny body erect. 'I am—expert,' he remarked. 'Make them better than Ponthwank.'

'OK,' Lloyd said. 'Make 'em, then.' And he went away.

The man called Joe hesitated, nursing the bruise on his head. The overalls caught his attention, and he examined them wonderingly. Where—oh, yes. They had been hanging in the room from which he had first emerged. His own garments had, naturally, dissipated during the trip—what trip?

Amnesia, he thought. He had fallen from the ... the something...when it slowed down and stopped. How odd this huge, machine-filled barn looked! It struck no chord of remembrance.

Amnesia, that was it. He was a worker. He made things. As for the unfamiliarity of his surroundings, that meant nothing. He was still dazed. The clouds would lift from his mind presently. They were beginning to do that already.

Work. Joe scuttled around the room, trying to goad his faulty memory. Men in overalls were doing things. Simple, obvious things. But how childish—how elemental! Perhaps this was a kindergarten.

After a while Joe went out into a stock room and examined some finished models of combination radio-phonographs. So that was it. Awkward and clumsy, but it wasn't his place to say so. No. His job was to make Twonkies.

Twonkies? The name jolted his memory again. Of course he knew how to make Twonkies. He'd made them all his life—had been specially trained for the job. Now they were using a different model of Twonky, but what the hell! Child's play for a clever workman.

Joe went back into the shop and found a vacant bench. He began to build a Twonky. Occasionally he slipped off and stole the material he needed. Once, when he couldn't locate any tungsten, he hastily built a small gadget and made it.

His bench was in a distant corner, badly lighted, though it seemed quite bright to Joe's eyes. Nobody noticed the console that was swiftly growing to completion there. Joe worked very, very fast. He ignored the noon whistle, and, at quitting time, his task was finished. It could, perhaps, stand another coat of paint; it lacked the Shimmertone of a standard Twonky. But none of the others had Shimmertone. Joe sighed, crawled under the bench, looked in vain for a relaxopad, and went to sleep on the floor.

A few hours later he woke up. The factory was empty. Odd! Maybe the working hours had changed. Maybe—Joe's mind felt funny. Sleep had cleared away the mists of amnesia, if such it had been, but he still felt dazed.

Muttering under his breath, he sent the Twonky into the stock room and compared it with the others. Superficially it was identical with a console radio-phonograph combination of the latest model.

Following the pattern of the others, Joe had camouflaged and disguised the various organs and reactors.

He went back into the shop. Then the last of the mists cleared from his mind. Joe's shoulders jerked convulsively.

'Great Snell!' he gasped. 'So that was it! I ran into a temporal snag!'

With a startled glance around, he fled to the storeroom from which he had first emerged. The overalls he took off and returned to their hook. After that, Joe went over to a corner, felt around in the air, nodded with satisfaction and seated himself on nothing, three feet above the floor. Then Joe vanished.

'Time,' said Kerry Westerfield, 'is curved. Eventually it gets back to the same place where it started. That's duplication.' He put his feet up on a conveniently outjutting rock of the chimney and stretched luxuriously. From the kitchen Martha made clinking noises with bottles and glasses.

'Yesterday at this time I had a Martini,' Kerry said. 'The time curve indicates that I should have another one now. Are you listening, angel?'

'I'm pouring,' said the angel distantly.

‘You get my point, then. Here’s another. Time describes a spiral instead of a circle. If you call the first cycle “a”, the second one’s “a plus 1”—see? Which means a double Martini tonight.’

‘I know where that would end,’ Martha remarked, coming into the spacious, oak-raftered living-room. She was a small, dark-haired woman, with a singularly pretty face and a figure to match. Her tiny gingham apron looked slightly absurd in combination with slacks and silk blouse. ‘And they don’t make infinity-proof gin. Here’s your Martini.’ She did things with the shaker and manipulated glasses.

‘Stir slowly,’ Kerry cautioned. ‘Never shake. Ah—that’s it.’ He accepted the drink and eyed it appreciatively. Black hair, sprinkled with grey, gleamed in the lamplight as he sipped the Martini. ‘Good. Very good.’

Martha drank slowly and eyed her husband. A nice guy, Kerry Westerfield. He was forty-odd, pleasantly ugly, with a wide mouth and with an occasional sardonic gleam in his grey eyes as he contemplated life. They had been married for twelve years, and liked it.

From outside, the late, faint glow of sunset came through the windows, picking out the console cabinet that stood against the wall by the door. Kerry peered at it with appreciation.

‘A pretty penny,’ he remarked. ‘Still—’

‘What? Oh. The men had a tough time getting it up the stairs. Why don’t you try it, Kerry?’

‘Didn’t you?’

‘The old one was complicated enough,’ Martha said in a baffled manner. ‘Gadgets. They confuse me. I was brought up on an Edison. You wound it up with a crank, and strange noises came out of a horn. That I could understand. But now—you push a button, and extraordinary things happen. Electric eyes, tone selections, records that get played on both sides, to the accompaniment of weird groanings and clickings from inside the console—probably you

understand those things. I don't even want to. Whenever I play a Crosby record in a superduper like that, Bing seems embarrassed.'

Kerry ate his olive. 'I'm going to play some Debussy.' He nodded towards a table. 'There's a new Crosby record for you. The latest.'

Martha wriggled happily. 'Can I, maybe, huh?'

'Uh-huh.'

'But you'll have to show me how.'

'Simple enough,' said Kerry, beaming at the console. 'Those babies are pretty good, you know. They do everything but think.'

'I wish they'd wash the dishes,' Martha remarked. She set down her glass, got up and vanished into the kitchen.

Kerry snapped on a lamp nearby and went over to examine the new radio, Mideastern's latest model, with all the new improvements. It had been expensive—but what the hell? He could afford it. And the old one had been pretty well shot.

It was not, he saw, plugged in. Nor were there any wires in evidence—not even an earth. Something new, perhaps. Built-in antenna and earth. Kerry crouched down, looked for a socket, and plugged the flex into it.

That done, he opened the doors and eyed the dials with every appearance of satisfaction. A beam of bluish light shot out and hit him in the eyes. From the depths of the console a faint, thoughtful clicking proceeded. Abruptly it stopped. Kerry blinked, fiddled with dials and switches, and bit at a fingernail.

The radio said, in a distant voice, 'Psychology pattern checked and recorded.'

'Eh?' Kerry twirled a dial. 'Wonder what that was? Amateur station—no, they're off the air. Hm-m-m.' He shrugged and went over to a chair beside the shelves of albums. His gaze ran swiftly over the titles and composers'

names. Where was the *Swan of Tuonela*? There it was, next to *Finlandia*. Kerry took down the album and opened it in his lap. With his free hand he extracted a cigarette from his pocket, put it between his lips and fumbled for the matches on the table beside him. The first match he lit went out.

He tossed it into the fireplace and was about to reach for another when a faint noise caught his attention. The radio was walking across the room towards him. A whiplike tendril flicked out from somewhere, picked up a match, scratched it beneath the table top—as Kerry had done—and held the flame to the man's cigarette.

Automatic reflexes took over. Kerry sucked in his breath, and exploded in smoky, racking coughs. He bent double, gasping and momentarily blind.

When he could see again, the radio was back in its accustomed place.

Kerry caught his lower lip between his teeth. 'Martha,' he called.

'Soup's on,' her voice said.

Kerry didn't answer. He stood up, went over to the radio and looked at it hesitantly. The electric flex had been pulled out of its socket. Kerry gingerly replaced it.

He crouched to examine the console's legs. They looked like finely finished wood. His exploratory hand told him nothing. Wood—hard and brittle.

How in hell—

'Dinner!' Martha called.

Kerry threw his cigarette into the fireplace and slowly walked out of the room. His wife, setting a gravy boat in place, stared at him.

'How many Martinis did you have?'

'Just one,' Kerry said in a vague way. 'I must have dozed off for a minute. Yeah. I must have.'

‘Well, fall to,’ Martha commanded. ‘This is the last chance you’ll have to make a pig of yourself on my dumplings, for a week, anyway.’

Kerry absently felt for his wallet, took out an envelope and tossed it at his wife. ‘Here’s your ticket, angel. Don’t lose it.’

‘Oh? I rate a compartment!’ Martha thrust the pasteboard back into its envelope and gurgled happily. ‘You’re a pal. Sure you can get along without me?’

‘Huh? Hm-m-m—I think so.’ Kerry salted his avocado. He shook himself and seemed to come out of a slight daze. ‘Sure, I’ll be all right. You trot off to Denver and help Carol have her baby. It’s all in the family.’

‘We-ell, my only sister—’ Martha grinned. ‘You know how she and Bill are. Quite nuts. They’ll need a steadying hand just now.’

There was no reply. Kerry was brooding over a forkful of avocado. He muttered something about the Venerable Bede.

‘What about him?’

‘Lecture tomorrow. Every term we bog down on the Bede, for some strange reason. Ah, well.’

‘Got your lecture ready?’

Kerry nodded. ‘Sure.’ For eight years he had taught at the University, and he certainly should know the schedule by this time!

Later, over coffee and cigarettes, Martha glanced at her wrist watch. ‘Nearly train time. I’d better finish packing. The dishes—’

‘I’ll do ‘em.’ Kerry wandered after his wife into the bedroom and made motions of futile helpfulness. After a while, he carried the bags down to the car. Martha joined him, and they headed for the depot.

The train was on time. Half an hour after it had pulled out, Kerry drove the car back into the garage, let himself into the house and yawned mightily. He

was tired. Well, the dishes, and then beer and a book in bed.

With a puzzled look at the radio, he entered the kitchen and started on the dishes. The hall phone rang. Kerry wiped his hands on a dish towel and answered it.

It was Mike Fitzgerald, who taught psychology at the University.

‘Hiya, Fitz.’

‘Hiya. Martha gone?’

‘Yeah. I just drove her to the train.’

‘Feel like talking, then? I’ve got some pretty good Scotch. Why not run over and gab a while?’

‘Like to,’ Kerry said, yawning again, ‘but I’m dead. Tomorrow’s a big day. Rain check?’

‘Sure. I just finished correcting papers, and felt the need of sharpening my mind. What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing. Wait a minute.’ Kerry put down the phone and looked over his shoulder, scowling. Noises were coming from the kitchen. What the hell!

He went along the hall and stopped in the doorway, motionless and staring. The radio was washing the dishes.

After a while he returned to the phone. Fitzgerald said, ‘Something?’

‘My new radio,’ Kerry told him carefully. ‘It’s washing the dishes.’

Fitz didn’t answer for a moment. His laugh was a bit hesitant. ‘Oh?’

‘I’ll call you back,’ Kerry said, and hung up. He stood motionless for a while, chewing his lip. Then he walked back to the kitchen and paused to watch.

The radio's back was towards him. Several limber tentacles were manipulating the dishes, expertly sousing them in hot, soapy water, scrubbing them with the little mop, dipping them into the rinse water and then stacking them neatly in the metal rack. Those whip-lashes were the only sign of unusual activity. The legs were apparently solid.

'Hey!' Kerry said.

There was no response.

He sidled round till he could examine the radio more closely. The tentacles emerged from a slot under one of the dials. The electric flex was dangling. No juice, then. But what—

Kerry stepped back and fumbled out a cigarette. Instantly the radio turned, took a match from its container on the stove and walked forward. Kerry blinked, studying the legs. They couldn't be wood. They were bending as the—the thing moved, elastic as rubber. The radio had a peculiar sidling motion unlike anything else on earth.

It lit Kerry's cigarette and went back to the sink, where it resumed the dishwashing.

Kerry phoned Fitzgerald again. 'I wasn't kidding. I'm having hallucinations or something. That damned radio just lit a cigarette for me.'

'Wait a minute.' Fitzgerald's voice sounded undecided. 'This is a gag, eh?'

'No. And I don't think it's a hallucination, either. It's up your alley. Can you run over and test my knee-jerks?'

'All right,' Fitz said. 'Give me ten minutes. Have a drink ready.'

He hung up, and Kerry, laying the phone back into its cradle, turned to see the radio walking out of the kitchen towards the living-room. Its square, boxlike contour was subtly horrifying, like some bizarre sort of hobgoblin. Kerry shivered.

He followed the radio, to find it in its former place, motionless and impassive. He opened the doors, examining the turntable, the phonograph arm and the other buttons and gadgets. There was nothing apparently unusual. Again he touched the legs. They were not wood, after all. Some plastic, which seemed quite hard. Or—maybe they were wood, after all. It was difficult to make certain, without damaging the finish. Kerry felt a natural reluctance to use a knife on his new console.

He tried the radio, getting local stations without trouble. The tone was good—unusually good, he thought. The phonograph—

He picked up Halvorsen's *Entrance of the Boyars* at random and slipped it into place, closing the lid. No sound emerged. Investigation proved that the needle was moving rhythmically along the groove, but without audible result. Well?

Kerry removed the record as the doorbell rang. It was Fitzgerald, a gangling, saturnine man with a leathery, wrinkled face and a tousled mop of dull-grey hair. He extended a large, bony hand.

‘Where’s my drink?’

‘Lo, Fitz. Come in the kitchen. I’ll mix. Highball?’

‘Highball.’

‘OK.’ Kerry led the way. ‘Don’t drink it just yet, though. I want to show you my new combination.’

‘The one that washes dishes?’ Fitzgerald asked. ‘What else does it do?’

Kerry gave the other a glass. ‘It won’t play records.’

‘Oh, well. A minor matter, if it’ll do the housework. Let’s take a look at it.’ Fitzgerald went into the living-room, selected *Afternoon of a Faun* and approached the radio. ‘It isn’t plugged in.’

‘That doesn’t matter a bit,’ Kerry said wildly.

‘Batteries?’ Fitzgerald slipped the record in place and adjusted the switches. ‘Ten inch—there. Now we’ll see.’ He beamed triumphantly at Kerry. ‘Well? It’s playing now.’

It was.

Kerry said, ‘Try that Halvorsen piece. Here.’ He handed the disc to Fitzgerald, who pushed the reject switch and watched the lever arm lift.

But this time the phonograph refused to play. It didn’t like *Entrance of the Boyars*.

‘That’s funny,’ Fitzgerald grunted. ‘Probably the trouble’s with the record. Let’s try another.’

There was no trouble with *Daphnis and Chloe*. But the radio silently rejected the composer’s *Bolero*.

Kerry sat down and pointed to a nearby chair. ‘That doesn’t prove anything. Come over here and watch. Don’t drink anything yet. You, uh, you feel perfectly normal?’

‘Sure. Well?’

Kerry took out a cigarette. The console walked across the room, picking up a match book on the way, and politely held the flame. Then it went back to its place against the wall.

Fitzgerald didn’t say anything. After a while he took a cigarette from his pocket and waited. Nothing happened.

‘So?’ Kerry asked.

‘A robot. That’s the only possible answer. Where in the name of Petrarch did you get it?’

‘You don’t seem much surprised.’

‘I am, though. But I’ve seen robots before; Westinghouse tried it, you know. Only this—’ Fitzgerald tapped his teeth with a nail. ‘Who made it?’

‘How the devil should I know?’ Kerry demanded. ‘The radio people, I suppose.’

Fitzgerald narrowed his eyes. ‘Wait a minute. I don’t quite understand—’

‘There’s nothing to understand. I bought this combination a few days ago. Turned in the old one. It was delivered this afternoon, and...’ Kerry explained what had happened.

‘You mean you didn’t know it was a robot?’

‘Exactly. I bought it as a radio. And—and—the damn thing seems almost alive to me.’

‘Nope.’ Fitzgerald shook his head, rose and inspected the console carefully. ‘It’s a new kind of robot. At least—’ He hesitated. ‘What else is there to think? I suggest you get in touch with the Mideastern people tomorrow and check up.’

‘Let’s open the cabinet and look inside,’ Kerry suggested.

Fitzgerald was willing, but the experiment proved impossible. The presumably wooden panels weren’t screwed into place, and there was no apparent way of opening the console. Kerry found a screwdriver and applied it, gingerly at first, then with a sort of repressed fury. He could neither pry free a panel nor even scratch the dark, smooth finish of the cabinet.

‘Damn!’ he said finally. ‘Well, your guess is as good as mine. It’s a robot. Only I didn’t know they could make ‘em like this. And why in a radio?’

‘Don’t ask me.’ Fitzgerald shrugged. ‘Check up tomorrow. That’s the first step. Naturally, I’m pretty baffled. If a new sort of specialised robot has been invented, why put it in a console? And what makes those legs move? There aren’t any casters.’

‘I’ve been wondering about that, too.’

‘When it moves, the legs look—rubbery. But they’re not. They’re hard as—as hardwood. Or plastic’

‘I’m afraid of the thing,’ Kerry said.

‘Want to stay at my place tonight?’

‘N-no. No. I guess not. The—robot can’t hurt me.’

‘I don’t think it wants to. It’s been helping you, hasn’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ Kerry said, and went off to mix another drink.

The rest of the conversation was inconclusive. Fitzgerald, several hours later, went home rather worried. He wasn’t as casual as he had pretended, for the sake of Kerry’s nerves. The impingement of something so entirely unexpected on normal life was subtly frightening. And yet, as he had said, the robot didn’t seem menacing.

Kerry went to bed, with a new detective mystery. The radio followed him into the bedroom and gently took the book out of his hand. Kerry instinctively snatched for it.

‘Hey!’ he said. ‘What the devil—’

The radio went back into the living-room. Kerry followed, in time to see the book replaced on the shelf. After a bit Kerry retreated, locking his door, and slept uneasily till dawn.

In dressing gown and slippers, he stumbled out to stare at the console. It was back in its former place, looking as though it had never moved. Kerry, rather white around the gills, made breakfast.

He was allowed only one cup of coffee. The radio appeared, reprovingly took the second cup from his hand and emptied it into the sink.

That was quite enough for Kerry Westerfield. He found his hat and topcoat and almost ran out of the house. He had a horrid feeling that the radio might

follow him, but it didn't, luckily for his sanity. He was beginning to be worried.

During the morning he found time to telephone Mideastern. The salesman knew nothing. It was a standard model combination, the latest. If it wasn't giving satisfaction, of course, he'd be glad to—'

'It's OK,' Kerry said, 'but who made the thing? That's what I want to find out.'

'One moment, sir.' There was a delay. 'It came from Mr Lloyd's department. One of our foremen.'

'Let me speak to him, please.'

But Lloyd wasn't very helpful. After much thought, he remembered that the combination had been placed in the stock room without a serial number. It had been added later.

'But who made it?'

'I just don't know. I can find out for you, I guess. Suppose I ring you back.'

'Don't forget,' Kerry said, and went back to his class. The lecture on the Venerable Bede wasn't too successful.

At lunch he saw Fitzgerald, who seemed relieved when Kerry came over to his table. 'Find out any more about your pet robot?' the psychology professor demanded.

No one else was within hearing. With a sigh Kerry sat down and lit a cigarette. 'Not a thing. It's a pleasure to be able to do this myself.' He drew smoke into his lungs. 'I phoned the company.'

'And?'

'They don't know anything. Except that it didn't have a serial number.'

'That may be significant,' Fitzgerald said.

Kerry told the other about the incidents of the book and the coffee, and Fitzgerald squinted thoughtfully at his milk. 'I've given you some psych tests. Too much stimulation isn't good for you.'

'A detective yarn!'

'Carrying it a bit to extremes, I'll admit. But I can understand why the robot acted that way, though I dunno how it managed it.' He hesitated. 'Without intelligence, that is.'

'Intelligence?' Kerry licked his lips. 'I'm not so sure that it's just a machine. And I'm not crazy.'

'No, you're not. But you say the robot was in the front room. How could it tell what you were reading?'

'Short of X-ray vision and superfast scanning and assimilative powers, I can't imagine. Perhaps it doesn't want me to read anything.'

'You've said something,' Fitzgerald grunted. 'Know much about theoretical machines of that type?'

'Robots?'

'Purely theoretical. Your brain's a colloid, you know. Compact, complicated—but slow. Suppose you work out a gadget with a multimillion radioatom unit embedded in an insulating material. The result is a brain, Kerry. A brain with a tremendous number of units interacting at light-velocity speeds. A radio tube adjusts current flow when it's operating at forty million separate signals a second. And, theoretically, a radioatomic brain of the type I've mentioned could include perception, recognition, consideration, reaction and adjustment in a hundred-thousandth of a second.'

'Theory.'

'I've thought so. But I'd like to find out where your radio came from.'

A page came over. 'Telephone call for Mr Westerfield.'

Kerry excused himself and left. When he returned, there was a puzzled frown knitting his dark brows. Fitzgerald looked at him inquiringly.

‘Guy named Lloyd, at the Mideastern plant. I was talking to him about the radio.’

‘Any luck?’

Kerry shook his head. ‘No. Well, not much. He didn’t know who had built the thing.’

‘But it was built in the plant?’

‘Yes. About two weeks ago—but there’s no record of who worked on it. Lloyd seemed to think that was very, very funny. If a radio’s built in the plant, they know who put it together.’

‘So?’

‘So nothing. I asked him how to open the cabinet, and he said it was easy. Just unscrew the panel in the back.’

‘There aren’t any screws,’ Fitzgerald said.

‘I know.’

They looked at one another.

Fitzgerald said, ‘I’d give fifty bucks to find out whether that robot was really built only two weeks ago.’

‘Why?’

‘Because a radioatomic brain would need training. Even in such matters as the lighting of a cigarette.’

‘It saw me light one.’

‘And followed the example. The dishwashing—hm-m-m. Induction, I suppose. If that gadget has been trained, it’s a robot. If it hasn’t—’ Fitzgerald stopped. Kerry blinked. ‘Yes?’

‘I don’t know what the devil it is. It bears the same relation to a robot that we bear to Eohippus. One thing I do know, Kerry; it’s very probable that no scientist today has the knowledge it would take to make a—a thing like that.’

‘You’re arguing in circles,’ Kerry said. ‘It was made.’

‘Uh-huh. But how—when—and by whom? That’s what’s got me worried.’

‘Well, I’ve a class in five minutes. Why not come over tonight?’ ‘Can’t. I’m lecturing at the Hall. I’ll phone you after, though.’ With a nod Kerry went out, trying to dismiss the matter from his mind. He succeeded pretty well. But dining alone in a restaurant that night, he began to feel a general unwillingness to go home. A hobgoblin was waiting for him.

‘Brandy,’ he told the waiter. ‘Make it double.’

Two hours later a taxi let Kerry out at his door. He was remarkably drunk. Things swam before his eyes. He walked unsteadily towards the porch, mounted the steps with exaggerated care and let himself into the house.

He switched on a lamp.

The radio came forward to meet him. Tentacles, thin but strong as metal, coiled gently around his body, holding him motionless. A pang of violent fear struck through Kerry. He struggled desperately and tried to yell, but his throat was dry.

From the radio panel a beam of yellow light shot out, blinding the man. It swung down, aimed at his chest. Abruptly a queer taste was perceptible under Kerry’s tongue.

After a minute or so, the ray clicked out, the tentacles flashed back out of sight and the console returned to its corner. Kerry staggered weakly to a chair and relaxed, gulping.

He was sober. Which was quite impossible. Fourteen brandies infiltrate a definite amount of alcohol into the system. One can't wave a magic wand and instantly reach a state of sobriety. Yet that was exactly what had happened.

The—robot was trying to be helpful. Only Kerry would have preferred to remain drunk.

He got up gingerly and sidled past the radio to the bookshelf. One eye on the combination, he took down the detective novel he had tried to read on the preceding night. As he had expected, the radio took it from his hand and replaced it on the shelf. Kerry, remembering Fitzgerald's words, glanced at his watch. Reaction time, four seconds.

He took down a Chaucer and waited, but the radio didn't stir. However, when Kerry found a history volume, it was gently removed from his fingers. Reaction time, six seconds.

Kerry located a history twice as thick.

Reaction time, ten seconds.

Uh-huh. So the robot did read the books. That meant X-ray vision and superswift reactions. Jumping Jehoshaphat!

Kerry tested more books, wondering what the criterion was. *Alice in Wonderland* was snatched from his hand; Millay's poems were not. He made a list, with two columns, for future reference.

The robot, then, was not merely a servant. It was a censor. But what was the standard of comparison?

After a while he remembered his lecture tomorrow, and thumbed through his notes. Several points needed verification. Rather hesitantly he located the necessary reference book—and the robot took it away from him.

'Wait a minute,' Kerry said. 'I need that.' He tried to pull the volume out of the tentacle's grasp, without success. The console paid no attention. It calmly replaced the book on the shelf.

Kerry stood biting his lip. This was a bit too much. The damned robot was a monitor. He sidled towards the book, snatched it and was out in the hall before the radio could move.

The thing was coming after him. He could hear the soft padding of its—its feet. Kerry scurried into the bedroom and locked the door. He waited, heart thumping, as the knob was tried gently.

A wire-thin cilium crept through the crack of the door and fumbled with the key. Kerry suddenly jumped forward and shoved the auxiliary bolt into position. But that didn't help, either. The robot's precision tools—the specialised antennae—slid it back; and then the console opened the door, walked into the room and came towards Kerry.

He felt a touch of panic. With a little gasp he threw the book at the thing, and it caught it deftly. Apparently that was all that was wanted, for the radio turned and went out, rocking awkwardly on its rubbery legs, carrying the forbidden volume. Kerry cursed quietly.

* * * *

The phone rang. It was Fitzgerald.

'Well? How'd you make out?'

'Have you got a copy of Cassen's *Social Literature of the Ages*?'

'I don't think so, no. Why?'

'I'll get it in the University library tomorrow, then.' Kerry explained what had happened. Fitzgerald whistled softly.

'Interfering, is it? Hm-m-m. I wonder ...'

'I'm afraid of the thing.'

'I don't think it means you any harm. You say it sobered you up?'

'Yeah. With a light ray. That isn't very logical.'

‘It might be. The vibratory equivalent of thiamine chloride.’

‘Light?’

‘There’s vitamin content in sunlight, you know. That isn’t the important point. It’s censoring your reading—and apparently it reads the books, with superfast reactions. That gadget, whatever it is, isn’t merely a robot.’

‘You’re telling me,’ Kerry said grimly. ‘It’s a Hitler.’

Fitzgerald didn’t laugh. Rather soberly, he suggested, ‘Suppose you spend the night at my place?’

‘No,’ Kerry said, his voice stubborn. ‘No so-and-so radio’s going to chase me out of my house. I’ll take an axe to the thing first.’

‘We-ell, you know what you’re doing, I suppose. Phone me if—if anything happens.’

‘OK,’ Kerry said, and hung up. He went into the living-room and eyed the radio coldly. What the devil was it—and what was it trying to do? Certainly it wasn’t merely a robot. Equally certainly, it wasn’t alive, in the sense that a colloid brain is alive.

Lips thinned, he went over and fiddled with the dials and switches. A swing band’s throbbing, erratic tempo came from the console. He tried the short-wave band—nothing unusual there. So?

So nothing. There was no answer.

After a while he went to bed.

At luncheon the next day he brought Cassen’s *Social Literature* to show Fitzgerald.

‘What about it?’

‘Look here.’ Kerry flipped the pages and indicated a passage. ‘Does this mean anything to you?’

Fitzgerald read it. ‘Yeah. The point seems to be that individualism is necessary for the production of literature. Right?’

Kerry looked at him. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Eh?’

‘My mind goes funny.’

Fitzgerald rumped his grey hair, narrowing his eyes and watching the other man intently. ‘Come again. I don’t quite—’

With angry patience, Kerry said, ‘This morning I went into the library and looked up this reference. I read it all right. But it didn’t mean anything to me. Just words. Know how it is when you’re fagged out and have been reading a lot? You’ll run into a sentence with a lot of subjunctive clauses, and it doesn’t percolate. Well, it was like that.’

‘Read it now,’ Fitzgerald said quietly, thrusting the book across the table.

Kerry obeyed, looking up with a wry smile. ‘No good.’

‘Read it aloud. I’ll go over it with you, step by step.’

But that didn’t help. Kerry seemed utterly unable to assimilate the sense of the passage.

‘Semantic block, maybe,’ Fitzgerald said, scratching his ear. ‘Is this the first time it’s happened?’

‘Yes—no. I don’t know.’

‘Got any classes this afternoon? Good. Let’s run over to your place.’

Kerry thrust away his plate. ‘All right. I’m not hungry. Whenever you’re ready—’

Half an hour later they were looking at the radio. It seemed quite harmless. Fitzgerald wasted some time trying to pry a panel off, but finally gave it up as

a bad job. He found pencil and paper, seated himself opposite Kerry and began to ask questions.

At one point he paused. 'You didn't mention that before.'

'Forgot it, I guess.'

Fitzgerald tapped his teeth with the pencil. 'Hm-m-m. The first time the radio acted up—'

'It hit me in the eye with a blue light.'

'Not that. I mean—what it said.'

Kerry blinked. 'What it said?' He hesitated. "'Psychology pattern checked and noted," or something like that. I thought I'd tuned in on some station and got part of a quiz programme or something. You mean—'

'Were the words easy to understand? Good English?'

'No, now that I remember it,' Kerry scowled. 'They were slurred quite a bit. Vowels stressed.'

'Uh-huh. Well, let's get on.' They tried a word-association test.

Finally Fitzgerald leaned back, frowning. 'I want to check this stuff with the last tests I gave you a few months ago. It looks funny to me—damned funny. I'd feel a lot better if I knew exactly what memory was. We've done considerable work on mnemonics—artificial memory. Still, it may not be that at all.'

'Eh?'

'That—machine. Either it's got an artificial memory, has been highly trained or else it's adjusted to a different milieu and culture. It has affected you—quite a lot.'

Kerry licked dry lips. 'How?'

‘Implanted blocks in your mind. I haven’t correlated them yet. When I do, we may be able to figure out some sort of answer. No, that thing isn’t a robot. It’s a lot more than that.’

Kerry took out a cigarette; the console walked across the room and lit it for him. The two men watched with a faint shrinking horror.

‘You’d better stay with me tonight,’ Fitzgerald suggested.

‘No,’ Kerry said. He shivered.

The next day Fitzgerald looked for Kerry at lunch, but the younger man did not appear. He telephoned the house, and Martha answered the call.

‘Hello! When did you get back?’

‘Hello, Fitz. About an hour ago. My sister went ahead and had her baby without me—so I came back.’ She stopped, and Fitzgerald was alarmed at her tone.

‘Where’s Kerry?’

‘He’s here. Can you come over, Fitz? I’m worried.’

‘What’s the matter with him?’

‘I—I don’t know. Come right away.’

‘OK,’ Fitzgerald said, and hung up, biting his lips. He was worried. When, a short while later, he rang the Westerfield bell, he discovered that his nerves were badly out of control. But sight of Martha reassured him.

He followed her into the living-room. Fitzgerald’s glance went at once to the console, which was unchanged, and then to Kerry, seated motionless by a window. Kerry’s face had a blank, dazed look. His pupils were dilated, and he seemed to recognise Fitzgerald only slowly.

‘Hello, Fitz,’ he said.

‘How do you feel?’

Martha broke in. ‘Fitz, what’s wrong? Is he sick? Shall I call the doctor?’

Fitzgerald sat down. ‘Have you noticed anything funny about that radio?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Then listen.’ He told the whole story, watching incredulity struggle with reluctant belief on Martha’s face. Presently she said, ‘I can’t quite—’

‘If Kerry takes out a cigarette, the thing will light it for him. Want to see how it works?’

‘N-no. Yes. I suppose so.’ Martha’s eyes were wide.

Fitzgerald gave Kerry a cigarette. The expected happened.

Martha didn’t say a word. When the console had returned to its place, she shivered and went over to Kerry. He looked at her vaguely.

‘He needs a doctor, Fitz.’

‘Yes.’ Fitzgerald didn’t mention that a doctor might be quite useless.

‘What is that thing?’

‘It’s more than a robot. And it’s been readjusting Kerry. I told you what’s happened. When I checked Kerry’s psychology patterns, I found that they’d altered. He’s lost most of his initiative.’

‘Nobody on earth could have made that—’

Fitzgerald scowled. ‘I thought of that. It seems to be the product of a well-developed culture, quite different from ours. Martian, perhaps. It’s such a specialised thing that it naturally fits into a complicated culture. But I do not understand why it looks exactly like a Mideastern console radio.’

Martha touched Kerry’s hand. ‘Camouflage?’

‘But why? You were one of my best pupils in psych, Martha. Look at this logically. Imagine a civilisation where a gadget like that has its place. Use inductive reasoning.’

‘I’m trying to. I can’t think very well. Fitz, I’m worried about Kerry.’

‘I’m all right,’ Kerry said.

Fitzgerald put his finger tips together. ‘It isn’t a radio so much as a monitor. In this other civilisation, perhaps every man has one, or maybe only a few—the ones who need it. It keeps them in line.’

‘By destroying initiative?’

Fitzgerald made a helpless gesture. ‘I don’t know! It worked that way in Kerry’s case. In others—I don’t know.’

Martha stood up. ‘I don’t think we should talk any more. Kerry needs a doctor. After that we can decide upon that.’ She pointed to the console.

Fitzgerald said, ‘It’d be rather a shame to wreck it, but—’ His look was significant.

The console moved. It came out from its corner with a sidling, rocking gait and walked towards Fitzgerald. As he sprang up, the whiplike tentacles flashed out and seized him. A pale ray shone into the man’s eyes.

Almost instantly it vanished; the tentacles withdrew, and the radio returned to its place. Fitzgerald stood motionless. Martha was on her feet, one hand at her mouth.

‘Fitz!’ Her voice shook.

He hesitated. ‘Yes? What’s the matter?’

‘Are you hurt? What did it do to you?’

Fitzgerald frowned a little. ‘Eh? Hurt? I don’t—’

‘The radio. What did it do?’

He looked towards the console. ‘Something wrong with it? Afraid I’m not much of a repairman, Martha.’

‘Fitz.’ She came forward and gripped his arm. ‘Listen to me.’ Quick words spilled from her mouth. The radio. Kerry. Their discussion.

Fitzgerald looked at her blankly, as though he didn’t quite understand. ‘I guess I’m stupid today. I can’t quite understand what you’re talking about.’

‘The radio—you know! You said it changed Kerry—’ Martha paused, staring at the man.

Fitzgerald was definitely puzzled. Martha was acting strangely. Queer! He’s always considered her a pretty level-headed girl. But now she was talking nonsense. At least, he couldn’t figure out the meaning of her words; there was no sense to them.

And why was she talking about the radio? Wasn’t it satisfactory? Kerry had said it was a good buy, with a fine tone and the latest gadgets in it. Fitzgerald wondered, for a fleeting second, if Martha had gone crazy.

In any case, he was late for his class. He said so. Martha didn’t try to stop him when he went out. She was pale as chalk.

Kerry took out a cigarette. The radio walked over and held a match.

‘Kerry!’

‘Yes, Martha?’ His voice was dead.

She stared at the—the radio. Mars? Another world—another civilisation? What was it? What did it want? What was it trying to do?

Martha let herself out of the house and went to the garage. When she returned, a small hatchet was gripped tightly in her hand.

Kerry watched. He saw Martha walk over to the radio and lift the hatchet. Then a beam of light shot out, and Martha vanished. A little dust floated up in the afternoon sunlight.

‘Destruction of life-form threatening attack,’ the radio said, slurring the words together.

Kerry’s brain turned over. He felt sick—dazed and horribly empty. Martha—

His mind churned. Instinct and emotion fought with something that smothered them. Abruptly the dams crumbled, and the blocks were gone, the barriers down. Kerry cried out hoarsely, inarticulately, and sprang to his feet.

‘Martha!’ he yelled.

She was gone. Kerry looked around. Where—

What had happened? He couldn’t remember.

He sat down in the chair again, rubbing his forehead. His free hand brought up a cigarette, an automatic reaction that brought instant response. The radio walked forward and held a lighted match ready.

Kerry made a choking, sick sound and flung himself out of the chair. He remembered now. He picked up the hatchet and sprang towards the console, teeth bared in a mirthless rictus.

Again the light beam flashed out.

Kerry vanished. The hatchet thudded on to the carpet.

The radio walked back to its place and stood motionless once more. A faint clicking proceeded from its radioatomic brain.

‘Subject basically unsuitable,’ it said, after a moment. ‘Elimination has been necessary.’ Click! ‘Preparation for next subject completed.’

Click.

‘We’ll take it,’ the boy said.

‘You won’t be making a mistake,’ smiled the rental agent. ‘It’s quiet, isolated and the price is quite reasonable.’

‘Not so very,’ the girl put in. ‘But it is just what we’ve been looking for.’

The agent shrugged. ‘Of course, an unfurnished place would run less. But—’

‘We haven’t been married long enough to have any furniture,’ the boy grinned. He put an arm around his wife. ‘Like it, hon?’

‘Hm-m-m. Who lived here before?’

The agent scratched his cheek. ‘Let’s see. Some people named Westerfield, I think. It was given to me for listing just about a week ago. Nice place. If I didn’t own my own house, I’d jump at it myself.’

‘Nice radio,’ the boy said. ‘Late model, isn’t it?’ He went over to examine the console.

‘Come along,’ the girl urged. ‘Let’s look at the kitchen again.’

‘OK, hon.’

They went out of the room. From the hall came the sound of the agent’s smooth voice, growing fainter. Warm afternoon sunlight slanted through the windows.

For a moment there was silence. Then—

Click!

A GREAT DEAL OF POWER

Eric Frank Russell

The concept of bungling aliens and fallible robots, as opposed to the super-beings who had been overwhelming the human race since the days of H. G Wells' War of the Worlds (1898), owes much to the British writer, Eric Frank Russell, who wrote a seminal group of stories around these themes in the Forties and early Fifties. In stories such as 'Diabologic' (1955) and novels like The Space Willies (1956), inept creatures from space were easily outwitted by lone earthmen, while his Jay Score series featured a robot with a sense of humour, who looked and acted exactly like a human being. Russell's inspiration for these pioneer stories had been the theories of Charles Fort, the American student of inexplicable phenomena, and in particular his belief that the human race was the 'property' of aliens. Indeed, for some years Russell served as the British representative of the Fortean Society until the demands of his work forced him to give up the post.

However seriously Eric Frank Russell (1905—1978) took Fort's concepts, this did not prevent him letting loose his sense of humour on them, which quickly brought him acclaim—especially in the United States where his wisecracking style often seemed more quintessentially American than that of home-grown authors. Not surprisingly, Russell proved a major influence on a number of important SF writers, and one of his greatest American admirers, Algis Budrys, commented about him in Fantasy and Science Fiction in August 1984, 'He was a writer of much delightfully entertaining work with an unexpected sting to it—but what a wise, witty and twinkle-eyed man he was, the sort of writer a field ought to be proud to be judged by.' Despite this esteem, Russell virtually gave up writing after 1960, although several collections of stories were subsequently issued including With a Strange Device (1964) and Like Nothing on Earth (1975). Among his robot stories, one of the funniest is 'A Great Deal of Power' which appeared in the August—September issue of Fantastic Universe. It is a tale of the apparently perfect automaton who follows instructions faultlessly—but in true Eric Frank Russell style there is a sting in the tail which is

typical of his work and at the same time re-emphasises the importance of his contribution to the humorous fantasy genre.

* * * *

Wurmser—fat, balding, with eyes like marble—gloated over William Smith, smacked his lips and said, ‘There you are—complete, tried and tested, a soldier of the Sixth Reich.’

‘With a thousand to follow,’ added Speidel. ‘Or ten thousand. Or one million.’ He was tall, thin, angular and looked like a hungry vulture.

The third man in the room, Kluge—crop-headed, with heavy jowls and the cold authoritative stare of a high-ranking officer—observed harshly, ‘It would be better not to count one’s conquests before one has made them.’ He favoured William Smith with an expression of mixed disapproval and doubt. ‘We have first to discover whether this civilian-styled dummy is as efficient as you claim.’

‘Want to bet?’ asked Speidel.

‘I am not interested in profiting by failures,’ Kluge told him stiffly. ‘I am concerned only with successes.’

‘You’ll see,’ Wurmser told him. He turned, snapped at William Smith, ‘Stand up!’

William Smith stood up. He was of medium height, handsome, thirtyish, well-groomed and looked intelligent.

‘Your name?’

‘William Smith.’

‘Your purpose?’

‘To destroy power at the direction of my masters.’

Kluge lowered his brows and demanded, ‘How?’

‘I shall request each nominee to surrender power voluntarily. If he refuses he dies.’

‘How?’ persisted Kluge.

‘I create within him the desire to die and he nourishes it to the very end.’

‘You hate power?’ prompted Wurmser.

‘I hate power,’ confirmed William Smith, his complete lack of emphasis somehow lending force to his words.

Kluge complained to Speidel, ‘It is about this that I have some misgivings. I have gone to the trouble of reading several authorities upon hypnosis. All say the same—a man cannot be compelled to do anything against his natural inclinations, anything which infringes upon his moral code.’

‘That is true—of hypnosis.’ Speidel grinned, exposing his teeth. ‘This faculty of his is not hypnosis. Don’t ask me what else it is because we don’t know. It is something we stumbled upon by accident and developed.’

‘Complete mental mastery,’ suggested Wurmser. ‘And it works!’ He paused, went on. ‘Certain Eastern mystics can and occasionally do will themselves into Nirvana or, in other words, death. Usually it takes them several days. No autopsy reveals an organic cause.’ He gestured towards William Smith. ‘He can make every victim go one better. We know—we’ve tried him out on a couple of handy deadbeats. They expired within hours, minutes’—he chuckled flatly— ‘*Of natural causes.*’

‘A dim-witted guinea-pig is one thing,’ opined Kluge, unimpressed. ‘A strong-willed man is another. In time of war—any kind of war—one has to overcome strong-willed opposition.’

‘He can do it,’ said Speidel, betraying not a shadow of doubt. ‘He can fight a war so cunningly that the enemy won’t even know it has started.’

‘The days of map-battles are through,’ contributed Wurmser with a touch of malice. ‘No more throwing of masses of pawns against other masses of

pawns. This is twenty-first-century super-chess. We leave the pawns undisturbed while we snatch away the big pieces one by one. They just vanish from the board—of natural causes.'

'I know the proposed technique.' Kluge waved an impatient hand. 'After all, I had a share in devising it. The fact that our methods will be radically different from any employed in the past does not make the war any the less a military operation. I view it from that aspect. Therefore I am duly cautious.'

'No more careful than we.' Speidel handed him a list. 'See for yourself. This is his first short list of victims. All are strong-willed men possessed of considerable personal power. Do you notice anything peculiar about them?'

'None are key-members of the opposition,' said Kluge, examining the list.

'Therefore the opposition will not smell danger before our first real test is completed,' Speidel pointed out. 'Not being affected by it they won't be interested, won't be suspicious. Indeed, all these powerful men have so little to do with the enemy military machine that their preliminary passing will serve only to confuse the issue when we do get started in earnest.'

'I approve.' Kluge gave him back the sheet of paper. 'You have exercised your imagination. I compliment you on it.'

'Thank you, Colonel-General.' Speidel was openly gratified. He passed the list to William Smith. 'Deal with these.'

Pocketing the list, William Smith picked up his hat. His clear-cut features were impassive. He might have been a young suburban husband casually going out to post a letter.

Watching him, Wurmser said, 'You have all your papers and passports?'

'I have them.'

'And you can think?'

'I can think.'

‘On no account will you return before completion of your task?’

‘I shall not return,’ agreed William Smith evenly.

‘And in a grave emergency, the last resort.. .?’

‘I shall press the red button which is set in my chest and thus destroy myself.’
His hand moved to his jacket.

‘Don’t touch it *here*,’ yelled Wurmser, involuntarily backing away fast.
‘Don’t touch it at all unless there is positively no other way out.’

‘Jumpy, aren’t you?’ said Speidel. ‘The red button isn’t set that delicately. I wouldn’t give him ten minutes if it were. Believe me, it takes some pressing.’

‘That may be,’ said Wurmser, ‘but a hand like his is pretty heavy and you can’t judge his touch by yours or mine.’ He shuddered, licked dry lips, said to William Smith, ‘You may go.’

Putting on his hat William Smith departed without a word. The trio in the room watched in silence until the door closed behind him. A long minute later Wurmser heaved a sigh of relief.

Kluge remarked, ‘You can make ingenious soldiers of plastics and metals, you and Speidel. You would not shine as soldiers yourselves.’

‘What of it? The cannon-fodder days have gone.’

‘Humph!’ Kluge’s air was that of one accommodating himself to a vastly changed present while still hankering for the past. Old-style wars were easier to handle—they embodied established and familiar rules.

Newton P. Fisher heaved his ample bulk out of the limousine, puffed his hanging chops. His slightly protruding eyes were cold as they observed the meek well-dressed young man waiting nearby.

‘No comment,’ he growled. ‘Beat it—scram!’

‘But, Mr Fisher, please allow—’

‘Allow *nothing*.’ Newton P. Fisher glowered at him. ‘I’ve been taken many a ride by you reporters. Now it’s your turn. Skip back to your garbage dump.’

‘Look, Mr Fisher, my name is Smith, William Smith.’ His words came swiftly, trying to hold the other while something in his eyes burned steadily through. ‘If only you would permit me a minute of your time . . .’

‘Pawson.’ Fisher turned to the blue-jawed, burly man who followed him out of the car. ‘This thing smells. Do something about it.’ He jerked his jacket straight with a defiant pull at the lapels, marched pompously into the building. The eyes followed him all the way.

Folding thick arms across his big chest Pawson stared belligerently at the frustrated interviewer, noted that the other was not fazed. ‘Now,’ began Pawson, ‘what’s the idea of chivvying the boss?’

‘Mr Fisher has much power.’

‘You bet he has,’ agreed Pawson. ‘So what?’

‘He must give it up.’

‘Yeah? To whom? To you?’

‘Heaven forbid,’ said William Smith fervently. ‘I couldn’t dream of such a thing.’

‘Neither could Fisher,’ assured Pawson. He made shooting motions. ‘All right, Nutski, on your way.’

‘But—’

‘Skedad!’ insisted Pawson. ‘Go some place else and brood—and wish the boss dead if you want.’

‘I have already done so.’ Tipping his hat slightly William Smith walked away, impassive, unhurried, peculiarly self-confident.

Watching him go Pawson threw a grin at the chauffeur, put a hairy finger to his forehead and made screwing motions. The chauffeur grinned back. 'He didn't hand out any pamphlets.'

'Saves me tearing them up.' Pawson strolled towards the building into which Fisher had disappeared. 'Stick around, Lou, the boss won't be long.' He went through the door.

Leaning on the wheel, the chauffeur picked his teeth, mooned up the street, pondered about crazy folk in general and the recent sample in particular. The sample was now out of sight.

Pawson reappeared three or four minutes later. He emerged from the doorway at a cumbersome run. Reaching the car he braced himself against its nearside door while he panted for breath. His eyes were searching the street—his features seemed moulded in stale dough.

After a while he wheezed, '*Christmas!*'

'Something wrong?' asked the chauffeur.

'Not much'—Pawson sucked in another lungful—'only the boss just curled up his toes for keeps.'

There was nothing about this Brussels office to suggest that Raoul Lefevre was the biggest man in Belgium and one of the forty biggest in the world. Neither was there anything outstanding in appearance about Lefevre himself. Slight, dapper, dark, he would pass anywhere as the normal nondescript component of a crowd.

'Sit down, Mr Smith.' His English was perfect. 'So you had contact with the late Newton P. Fisher. His end was a great shock. It upset quite a lot of things.'

'It was intended to,' said William Smith.

'Many of them may not be readjusted for months, perhaps years, and .. .' He perked up, gave his caller a sharp look. 'What was that remark you just

made?’

‘It was intended to.’

‘Just what do you mean by that?’

‘The Fisherless chaos was created.’

Leaning forward, elbows on desk, Lefevre said slowly and deliberately, ‘Press reports make no suggestion that Fisher’s death was engineered. Are you asserting that he was murdered?’

‘Executed,’ corrected William Smith.

Studying him carefully Lefevre asked, ‘Who sent you to tell me about this?’

‘I have come more or less automatically.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you are next on the list.’

‘Next?’ Lefevre was puzzled. ‘On *what* list. *Whose* list?’

‘Mine.’

‘Let me get this straight. Are you trying to warn me that you have obtained from somewhere a roster of persons who are fated for death, that Fisher was first on that list and that I am second?’

‘Precisely,’ agreed William Smith, his eyes burning strangely at the other. ‘Though you may save yourself by voluntarily surrendering all your considerable influence.’

‘Who says so?’ demanded Lefevre.

‘I do.’

‘Ah!’ Standing up, his expression pained, Lefevre pressed a wall-stud. ‘I perceive that you have gained an interview under false pretences. You are not connected with Fisher in any way. You are merely another crank. I have long been the target of cranks—in my position it is inevitable.’ He turned to the one who had answered his call. ‘Emile, please show Mr Smith out. See that he does not return.’

‘There will be no necessity,’ William Smith assured. ‘My purpose has been served.’ He went out, accompanied by the silent Emile and conscious of the other’s grim stare behind him.

Crossing the road he found a bench in the tiny gardens facing Lefevre’s office, sat there gazing steadily at the second floor window. Now and again his attention moved off to follow the visivox wires as if speculating what unhearable unseeable stirrings might be running within them—but always his gaze returned to the window.

One hour and fourteen minutes later a long silvery automobile slid up to the main door, a bearded man got out. Bearing a small black case he hustled through the front door. Still William Smith watched the window and the wires.

After a while someone pulled curtains across the window. William Smith did not bother to wait until the death-wagon arrived.

Ignace Tatarescu smoothed his black skin-tight uniform, adjusted the black-and-gold ribbon of a jewelled order around his neck, carefully centred its sparkling cross in line with his triple row of brag-rags.

‘This Smith does not offer himself at a convenient time,’ he grumbled to his valet. ‘However, he is well introduced and I suppose I had better afford him a few minutes.’ He studied himself in a full-length mirror. ‘Always I am affording a few minutes for someone. Where would the world be if I had not enough minutes?’

‘It is a problem, excellency.’

‘Oh, well, show him in. Have the small table set with brandied coffee and sweetmeats.’ He paraded to his favourite spot by the fireplace, struck his favourite pose and held it until his visitor entered. ‘Mr Smith?’

‘Yes, your excellency.’

‘Please be seated.’ Lowering himself into an ornate chair Tatarescu ran finger and thumb along the creases of his colourful pants. ‘Why have you sought this interview, Mr Smith?’

‘You are strong.’

‘Of course.’ Tatarescu preened himself. ‘The world needs strong men. Therefore I am strong.’

‘Too strong,’ said William Smith, looking at him steadily without blinking.

‘What a diplomat!’ laughed Tatarescu. ‘He gains an interview and promptly uses it to criticise my position for which, permit me to tell you, young man, I have fought long and hard.’

‘More’s the pity,’ remarked William Smith.

‘Eh? What do you mean?’

‘It will be so much the more difficult for you to give it up.’

‘I have not the slightest intention of giving it up. When Tatarescu gives up Tatarescu will be dead.’

‘You said it!’ William Smith stated.

The other scowled. It was a much-practised expression. ‘If that is a threat, bear in mind that we are not as alone as we seem. One overt move on your part will mark your end.’ He raised his voice, called towards the door, ‘Escort Mr Smith to the main gates.’ Then to his visitor, ‘The interview is over. You will never be granted another one by me.’

‘No,’ agreed William Smith, still looking at him. ‘Of course not.’

Choosing that moment to gaze straight into those queer orbs Tatarescu saw in them an elusive something that should not have been there, something of pinhead size and far back, something supernally brilliant, intense, compelling, irresistible. It seemed to be twisting his own brain into a new and unwanted path. He came erect, rising like one in a dream. His voice, when it came, was low and hoarse.

‘Never—*never!*’ He shouted it.

‘We shall see.’ William Smith bowed from the waist, backed towards the frowning guards now waiting inside the door, permitted them to conduct him away. He left the room full of silence.

Once outside the palace he climbed the path to the crest of an overlooking hill, squatted crosslegged at the top. There he brooded over the ornate edifice until dusk approached and lights began to twinkle in the neighbouring city.

He was still there, waiting in the darkness, when bells of the city’s churches tolled monotonously and the loudspeakers of the civic address system boomed their news through streets and avenues.

‘*Al Marechal Murte!*’

‘Tatarescu is no more!’

Behind the slums of Tangier, at the desert end of the Street of the Ouled Nails, lay the Sharia Ahmed Hassan, a long dark dirty alley through which William Smith carefully picked his way.

Counting the low doors set in the massive wall at one side he reached the one he wanted, pulled its dangling bell-cord, waited patiently. Soon a thin-featured Arab appeared, took his card.

He heard the other’s slippers shuffling away through the night shadows of the courtyard, and a distant, low mutter of ‘*A Giaour!*’

Many minutes crawled past before the Arab returned, beckoned to him, led him through the courtyard, through numberless passages and into a deeply carpeted room. There he paused to view the old white-bearded man facing him across a low octagonal table. The old man had a beak nose, rheumy but crafty eyes, kept his hands hidden in his capacious sleeves.

‘I am William Smith.’

The oldster nodded, said in a rasping voice, ‘So your card says.’

‘You are Abou ben Sayyid es Harouma?’

‘I am. What of it?’

‘According to my list you are to be requested to return to the obscurity whence you came.’

‘Indeed? You are amazingly candid.’ Abou ben Sayyid drew a hand from a sleeve, used it to stroke his beard. ‘In my long years I have been the subject of surprising suggestions and many highly imaginative threats. Nevertheless, as you cannot help but perceive, I am very far from dead.’

‘Not far,’ corrected William Smith. ‘Nearer than you think.’

Abou ben Sayyid sighed resignedly and smote a gong by his side. ‘The moon is full. It is always at such a time that Hakim the Cobbler becomes queer in the head. Goodbye, Mr Smith.’

Three servants came in at the run. William Smith stood staring, staring until Abou said impatiently to the servants, ‘I am heavy with the burden of years and he tires me. Take him away.’ He lay back exhaustedly to prove it. He was an easy mark.

William Smith got back into the lane. The courtyard door clanged shut. The bell-cord hung limp, unstirring in the night air.

Leaning against the facing wall, hands deep in his pockets, he waited until after forty minutes a terrible keening arose from the house.

‘Aie! Aie-e-ee!’

Beneath the veiled moon he strolled away.

A certain Salvador de Marella, of Cartagena, was the last name on this brief, experimental list of guinea-pigs. Salvador was not sharp like Lefevre, nor ruthless like Tatarescu, nor cunning as Abou ben Sayyid. He was the supreme opportunist with more than his share of luck—and he enjoyed the delusion that it would never run out.

Salvador had all the jovial humour of the really successful gambler. He interviewed William Smith and laughed and laughed and laughed.

And laughed himself to death.

All three were there waiting—Wurmser, Speidel and Kluge—when William Smith came back. The first two were gleeful, triumphant—the last one stolid. They had not needed to bide their instrument’s personal account of his adventures. The radio and the video already had told them enough.

William Smith came quietly in, hung up his hat, stood in the middle of the room. It was as if standing were to him a natural lifelong pose. As became an automaton he never sat unless asked or ordered.

‘Perfect,’ declared Speidel, rubbing satisfied hands together and looking at Kluge. ‘Perfect even to the prompt and obedient return. A boomerang that comes right back so that we can use it again and again. Does this cure your scepticism?’

‘Nothing will ever cure my scepticism,’ said Kluge. ‘For instance, it would be a great improvement if he could deal effectively with his victims without the necessity of meeting them face to face and indulging in futile argument.’

‘Impossible! He must make close mental contact for a minimum period to implant a delayed death-desire. There is no way of doing it remotely. If there were we would not need him at all.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Kluge. ‘Therefore I shall concede that you have created a weapon of value.’

‘You bet we have,’ Wurmser endorsed. ‘And it has functioned precisely as designed.’

‘Of sufficient worth,’ Kluge continued, ignoring him, ‘to justify my bringing it to the attention of the proper authorities. It should no longer be a secret among ourselves.’

‘Secrecy will still be necessary,’ Speidel pointed out.

‘I am not an imbecile,’ Kluge retorted irritably. ‘Neither are the authorities imbeciles. The task of multiplying and directing this new robotic weapon will be conducted efficiently and with circumspection.’

To divert the other’s manifest annoyance Speidel turned to William Smith and said, ‘Do you hear that? There is to be an army of Smiths.’

William Smith spoke, his tones as flat and unemotional as ever. ‘You enabled me to think. Therefore I have been thinking.’

‘So?’ prompted Speidel.

‘You also conditioned me to have an intense revulsion for personal power. So I hate power.’

‘Quite right too,’ agreed Speidel, throwing the others an amused wink.

‘Through me *you* have power,’ remarked William Smith.

Speidel and Wurmser stiffened. Kluge squared his shoulders.

‘The conclusion is obvious and unavoidable,’ William Smith went on. ‘I have reached it because you made me what I am. So you must be destroyed.’

Wurmser shuffled backwards, talking in high squeaks. ‘You cannot give *us* the death-desire. We foresaw that risk and conditioned you against it. You

can project your will only where instructed by us. You must obey and project it only where instructed. Understand?’

William Smith spoke with terrifying lack of morbidity. ‘I understand. I know too that you could take me to pieces as easily as you put me together.’ Again his eyes went over them. ‘But that would not destroy your power because it is hidden in the inventiveness of your minds. You could soon make a thousand exactly like me.’

‘Where’s a blaster?’ Speidel tensed, looked searchingly around the room. ‘He has no instinct of self-preservation and would let me burn him down where he stands, like the dummy he is. Has anyone got a blaster?’

Kluge shook his head, continued to watch William Smith.

‘Yet I cannot give you the death-compulsion,’ William Smith mused, neither pleased nor grieved about it. ‘It is forbidden. My circuits embody a block which prevents me doing what is necessary. Anyway, I would not impose it upon you.’

‘Why not?’ inquired Kluge.

‘Because that would leave *me* possessed of power. I would stand alone, full of this aptitude which I have been conditioned to destroy.’

‘You’re in quite a fix, aren’t you?’ suggested Kluge.

‘You’re all tangled up in cockeyed logic,’ added Speidel.

‘He has a gaunt and hungry look,’ quoted Wurmser, absorbing fresh courage from the others.

‘Such men are dangerous,’ reminded Kluge, erect as on parade.

William Smith murmured more to himself than to his hearers, ‘This impasse is more apparent than real because the solution is easy. It was built into me. It is the conditioned escape—and the logical ending.’ His hand, poised above his chest. ‘*This is an emergency.*’

'No!' screamed Wurmser. *'No!'* He flapped his hands with sheer horror. Speidel ran for the door. Kluge stayed put, frozen-eyed, unmoving. *'No!'* screamed Wurmser.

The hand smacked the chest right over the concealed red button. The resulting explosion wrecked an entire street, sent a huge column of pulverised brickwork cloud-high.

Behind that button had lurked a great deal of power.

DOODAD

Ray Bradbury

Comic fantasy is full of the most bizarre and almost indescribable objects of varying degrees of usefulness or malevolence—vide Terry Pratchett's Luggage which I mentioned earlier. Yet these Wotsits, Thingamajigs, Doodas and so on have been a part of the genre for years as the following tale shows, written half a century ago by the writer who has been described as 'a whimsical fantasist in the old tradition'. Ray Bradbury (1920—) is actually a writer hard to classify because of the unique way in which he has combined his affection for small town America where he grew up with all the trappings of space travel and life on other worlds. This said, Bradbury's fame is largely attributed to his trio of classic SF novels, The Martian Chronicles (1950), The Illustrated Man (1951) and Fahrenheit 451 (1953), all of which have been filmed with varying degrees of success.

Bradbury has frequently acknowledged his debt to a writer also represented in this book, Henry Kuttner, who encouraged his first literary efforts and even wrote the ending to one of Bradbury's first published stories. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising to find humour in quite a few of his short stories, where comic incidents have a habit of emerging unexpectedly to convulse the reader with amusement. Typical examples that spring to mind are 'Genie Trouble' (1940), 'The Mad Wizards of Mars' (1949), 'The Inspired Chicken Motel' (1969), 'Colonel Stonesteel's Genuine Home-Made Truly Egyptian Mummy' (1989), and his wonderful collection of verse, When Elephants Last in the Dooryard Bloomed (1973).

'Doodad', Bradbury's contribution to the lore of whacky gadgets, is also something of a landmark story in his career. During his early days as a writer, he desperately wanted to get into the pages of the prestigious magazine, Astounding Stories. This was edited by the legendary John W. Campbell, author of the classic novella about an alien invader, 'Who Goes There?' (1938), which has twice been filmed as The Thing. From 1937 until his death in 1971 Campbell occupied the editorial chair at Astounding, where he was responsible for discovering and promoting the work of such writers as Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein and L. Ron Hubbard. For several

years Bradbury made numerous unsuccessful submissions to Campbell until finally, in October 1943, he achieved his ambition when 'Doodad' was accepted. The story is proof, if such is needed, that Ray Bradbury could easily have become a master of comic fantasy had he not chosen to diversify his talent so widely in all the other areas of Science Fiction and Fantasy.

* * * *

There was a crowd pressed together in front of the shop.

Crowell light-footed it into that crowd, his face long and sad. He cast a glance back over one lean shoulder, muttered to himself, and widened a lane through the people, quick.

A hundred yards behind him a low shining black beetle car hummed to the kerb. A door clicked open, and the fat man with the grey-white face climbed heavily out, his expression one of silent, dead-pan hatred. Two bodyguards sat in the front seat.

Gyp Crowell wondered why he bothered running away. He was tired. Tired of trying to tell news over the audio every night and waking up every morning with gangsters at his heels just because he had mentioned the fact that 'a certain fat man has been doing some dishonest finagling of Plastics, Inc'

Now, here was the fat man himself. That black beetle car had trailed Crowell from Pasadena all the way here.

Crowell lost himself in the crowd. He wondered vaguely why this crowd should be so curious about the shop. Certainly it was unusual, but so is everything else in southern California. He broke through the inner circle, looked up at the large scarlet lettering over the blue glass windows, stared at it without a flicker of expression on his lean, perpetually sad face:

The sign on the shop said:

THINGUMABOBS DOODADS

WHATCHAMACALLITS HINKIES

FORMODALDAFRAYS

HOOTINANNIES GADGETS

DOOHINGIES

Crowell took it in a dead calm. So this was the assignment his audio editor had given him to cover? Small-time screwpot stuff. Should be handled by a cub reporter. Nuts.

Then he thought about Steve Bishop, the fat man with the guns and the bodyguards. Any old port in a storm.

Crowell drew out a small transpara pad, scribbled down a few of those names—doohingies, hinkies—realising that Bishop couldn't shoot him in this mob. Sure, maybe he had a right to shoot, after that threatened expose and the blackmail Gyp was using against Bishop: the three-dimensional colour images—

Crowell eased over to the translucent door of the shop, pushed it, and followed it in. He'd be safe in here, and doing his routine news assignment, too.

Brilliant light flushed the interior of the shop; pouring over a cold blue-and-white colour scheme. Crowell felt chilly. Counting seventeen display cases, he investigated their contents at random, dead-grey eyes flicking passionlessly.

A very tiny man popped out from behind a blue glass case. He was so tiny and bald that Crowell had to repress a desire to pat him upon the head in fatherly fashion. That bald head was made for patting.

The tiny man's face was quite square and a peculiar yellowed tint, as if it had been aged much in the same manner as an old newspaper. 'Yes?' he said.

Crowell said 'Hello' quietly, taking his time. Now that he was in here he had to say something. So he said, 'I want to buy a ... a doohingey.' His voice struck the same tiredly grieved note his face expressed.

'Fine, fine,' said the tiny man. He dry-washed his hands. 'I don't know why, but you're the first customer. The other people just stand out there and laugh at my shop. Now—what year doohingey will you have? And what model?'

Crowell didn't know. He knew only surprise, but his face didn't show it. He'd begun his enquiry as if he knew all about it. Now was no time to confess ignorance. He pretended to muse over the problem and finally said, 'I guess a 1973 model would do. Nothing too modern.'

The tiny proprietor blinked. 'Ah. Ah, I see you are a man of precise decision and choice. Step right this way.' And he scuttled down an aisle, to pause before a large case in which reclined a—something.

It might have been a crankshaft, and yet it resembled a kitchen shelf with several earrings dangling along a metal edge which supported three horn-shaped attachments and six mechanisms Crowell couldn't recognise, and a thatch of tentacles resembling shoelaces poured out of the top.

Crowell made a throat noise, as if strangling on a button. Then he looked again. He decided that the tiny man was an utter idiot; but he kept this decision sealed in his gaunt brain.

As for the little proprietor, he was standing in a perfect ecstasy of happiness, eyes shining, lips parted in a warm smile, hands clasped over his chest, bending forward expectantly.

'Do you like it?' he asked.

Crowell nodded gravely. 'Ye-ess. Ye-ess, I guess it's all right. I've seen better models, though.'

'Better!' the little man exclaimed. He drew himself up. 'Where?' he demanded. 'Where!'

Crowell could have got flustered. He didn't. He simply took out his note pad, scribbled in it, kept his eyes on it and said cryptically, '*You* know where—' hoping this would satisfy the man.

It did.

'Oh!' gibbered the proprietor. 'Then *you* know, too. How fine to deal with a connoisseur. How fine.'

Crowell flicked a glance out of the window, past the chuckling crowd. The fat man and his bodyguards and the black beetle car were gone. They had given up the chase for a while.

Crowell whipped his pad into his pocket, put his hand on the case with the doohingey in it. 'I'm in a great hurry. Could I take it with me? I haven't money, but I'll make a down payment in trade. All right?'

'Perfectly all right.'

'OK.' Crowell, with some misgiving, reached into his loose-fitting grey blouse and drew forth a metal apparatus, an old pipe cleaner that had seen better days. It was broken and bent into a weird shape. 'Here you are. A hinkie. A 1944 model hinkie.'

'Oh.' The little man exhaled dismay. He stared with horror at Crowell. 'Why, that's not a hinkie!'

'Uh ... isn't it?'

'No, of course not.'

'Of course not,' repeated Crowell carefully.

'It's a whatchamacallit,' said the little man, blinking. 'And not a whole one either; just part of one. You like your little joke, don't you, Mr—'

'Crowell. Yeah. My little joke. Yeah. If you don't mind. Trade? I'm in a great hurry.'

‘Yes, yes. I’ll load it on a skate platform so we can roll it out to your car. One moment.’

The tiny man moved swiftly, procuring a small wheeled truck, onto which he transferred the doohingey. He helped Crowell roll it to the door. Crowell stopped him at the door. ‘Just a moment.’ He looked out. The black beetle car was nowhere in sight. ‘Good. OK.’

The little man’s voice was soft with caution. ‘Just remember, Mr Crowell—please don’t go around killing people with this doohingey. Be ... be selective. Yes, that’s it, be selective and discerning. Remember, Mr Crowell?’

Crowell swallowed a number-ten-size lump in his throat.

‘I’ll remember,’ he said, and hurriedly finished the deal.

He took the low-level avenue tube out of the Wilshire district heading for his home in Brentwood. Nobody trailed him. He was sure of that. He didn’t know what Bishop’s plans for the next few hours might be. He didn’t know. He didn’t care. He was in the middle of another pall of melancholy. It was a lousy, screwball world, in which everybody had to be dishonest to get along. That fat slug of a Bishop, he—

The contraption on the seat beside him drew his attention. He looked at it with a little shaking dry laugh coming out of his mouth.

‘So you’re a doohingey?’ he said. ‘Huh, everybody to their own special racket. Bishop and his plastics, me and my blackmail, and that little dope with the doodads and hingdooies. At that, I think the little guy is the smartest.’

He turned his white beetle car off the sub-branch tube and went down a side tunnel that came up under his block. Garaging his car and scanning the surrounding park carefully, he lugged the doohingey upstairs, opened the dial door, went in, closed the door, and set the doohingey on the table. He poured himself a few fingers of brandy.

A moment later someone rapped softly, quietly and very slowly on the door. No use putting it off. Crowell answered and opened it.

‘Hello, Crowell.’

The fat man at the door had a face like cooked pork, cold and flabby. His eyelids drooped over red-veined, green-irised eyes. He had a cigar in his mouth that moved with his words.

‘Glad you’re home, Crowell. Been waiting to see you.’

Crowell backed up and the fat man came in. The fat man sat down, put his hands over his round belly and said, ‘Well?’

Crowell swallowed. ‘I haven’t got the images here, Bishop.’

The fat man didn’t say anything. He unlocked his two hands slowly, reached into his pocket as if to get a handkerchief and brought out a small paralysis gun instead. Cold blue steel.

‘Change your mind, Crowell?’

Crowell’s sad white face looked all sadder with cold sweat on it. His throat muscles lengthened. He tried to get his brain working, but it was locked in cement, hard and hot and furiously, suddenly afraid. It didn’t show through to the outside. He saw Bishop, the gun, the room joggling up and down in his vision.

And then he saw the ... the doohingey.

Bishop shifted the safety stud on the gun. ‘Where’ll you have it? Head or chest? They say you die quicker if they paralyse your brain first. I prefer touching the heart with it, myself. Well?’

‘Wait a moment,’ said Crowell carelessly. He made himself draw back a slow pace. He sat down, all the while realising that Bishop’s finger was quavering on a hair trigger. ‘You’re not going to kill me; you’re going to thank me for letting you in on the greatest invention of our time.’

Bishop's huge face didn't change a line or muscle. His cigar waggled. 'Snap it, Crowell. I haven't time for greasing the tongue.'

'Plenty of time,' said Crowell, calmly. 'I've got a perfect murder weapon for you. Believe it or not, I have. Take a look at that machine sitting on the table.'

The gun remained firm, blue steel. Bishop's eyes slid to one side of his face, jerked back. 'So what?' he said.

'So if you listen to me you can be the biggest plastics boss ever to hit the Pacific coast. You want that, don't you?'

Bishop's eyes widened a microscopic trifle, narrowed. 'Are you stalling me for time?'

'Look, Bishop, I know when I'm cooked. That's why I'm cutting you in on ... on that damned doohingey of mine.'

'On that *what?*'

'I just call it a doohingey. Haven't got a name for it yet.' Crowell's brain was rotating, throwing ideas off one after another with the heated centrifuge of desperation. One idea stuck. *Keep Bishop stalled until you have a chance to get his gun. Bluff him. Bluff him like hell. Now—*

Crowell cleared his throat. 'It... it's a radio killer,' he lied. 'All I have to do is give it directions and it'll kill anyone. No mess. No nothing. No clues. Perfect crime, Bishop. Interested?'

Bishop shook his head. 'You been drinking. It's getting late—'

'Hold on,' said Crowell, suddenly tensing forward, his grey eyes bright. 'Don't move, Bishop. I've got you covered. That machine is trained on you. Before you came in I set it to a certain frequency. One squeak out of you and it'll nail you!'

Bishop's cigar fell to the floor. The gun hand wavered.

Crowell saw his chance. His lean muscles bunched into one tight, compact coil. His mouth opened, words darted out. ‘Watch it, Bishop! All right, machine, do your stuff! Kill Bishop!’

And with that, Crowell catapulted himself. He felt himself leave the chair, saw the startled look on Bishop’s face. The misdirection had worked. The gun went off. The silver beam sizzled past Crowell’s ear and splashed on the wall. Crowell snatched with both hands to clutch Bishop, get the gun.

But Crowell never got to Bishop.

Bishop was dead.

The doohingey got there first.

Crowell had a drink. Then he had another. His stomach was floating in the stuff. But he still couldn’t forget how Bishop looked—dead.

Bishop had died—how? He had been sort of stabbed, shot, strangled, electrocuted—he’d been... uh... you know what I mean? He was sort of—dead. Yeah, that’s it. Dead.

Crowell had another drink just on account of that. He looked at the bedroom wall and decided that sometime in the next minutes those bodyguards would be busting in up here, looking for their boss. But Crowell couldn’t stand the thought of going in the living-room to see where Bishop lay on the floor next to the—doohingey. He shivered.

After two more drinks that didn’t even touch his mind, he got around to packing some of his clothes. He didn’t know where he was going, but he was going. He was about to leave the house when the audio made a gonging noise.

‘Yes?’

‘Mr Crowell?’

‘Talking.’

‘This is the little man at the Doodads Shop.’

‘Oh, yeah. Hello.’

‘Would you mind dropping by the shop again? And please bring the doohingey with you, yes? I fear that I’ve short-changed you on that model. I have another one here that is much better.’

Crowell’s voice got caught in his throat. ‘This one seems to be working fine.’

He cut the contact and held onto his brains with both hands so they couldn’t slide down into his shoes. He hadn’t planned on killing anybody. He didn’t like the idea. And that put him on the spot even more than before. Those gunmen bodyguards wouldn’t stop now until—

His jaw stiffened. Let them come after him. He wasn’t running away this time. He was staying in town, doing his news work as if nothing had happened. He was tired of the whole business. He didn’t care if he got shot now or not. He’d even laugh with joy when they were shooting.

No use making unnecessary trouble, though. He’d carry the fat man’s—body—down to the garage, put it in the back seat of the white beetle, and drive past some lonely spot, bury it, and hold the bodyguards off by telling them he had kidnapped Bishop. Yeah, that was a good idea. Clever man this Crowell.

‘All right—’ He tried to lift Bishop’s tremendous body. He couldn’t. He finally got the body downstairs to the beetle, though— the doohingey did it.

Crowell stayed upstairs until the job was done. He didn’t like to watch the doohingey at work with a dead body.

‘Ah, Mr Crowell.’ The little proprietor opened the gleaming glass door. There was still a small crowd outside. ‘I see you brought the doohingey. Good.’

Crowell set the contraption on the counter, thinking quickly to himself. Well. Now maybe explanations would be made. He’d have to be subtle; no blunt questions. He’d—

‘Look, Mr Whosis, I didn’t tell you, but I’m an audio reporter. I’d like to broadcast a story about you and your shop for the Audio-News. But I’d like it in your own words.’

‘You know as much about the thingumabobs as I do,’ replied the little man.

‘Do I?’

‘That’s the impression you gave me—’

‘Oh, sure. Sure I do. But it’s always better when we quote somebody. See?’

‘Your logic is nebulous, but I shall cooperate. Your listeners will probably want to know all about my Doodad Shop, eh? Well, it took thousands of years of travelling to make it grow.’

‘Miles,’ corrected Crowell.

‘Years,’ stated the little man.

‘Naturally,’ said Crowell.

‘You might call my shop the energy result of misconstrued improper semantics. These instruments might well be labelled “Inventions That Do Everything Instead Of Something”.’

‘Oh, of course,’ said Crowell, blankly.

‘Now, when a man shows another man a particular part of a beetle car’s automotive controls and he can’t recall the proper label for that part, what does he do?’

Crowell saw the light. ‘He calls it a doodad or a hingey or a whatchamacallit. Right?’

‘Correct. And if a woman, talking to another woman about her washing machine or egg beater or knitting or crocheting and *she* had a psychological blocking, forgets the proper semantic label, what does *she* say?’

‘She says, “Take this hungamabob and trinket the turndel with it. You grasp the dipsy and throw it over the flimsy”,’ said Crowell, like a school kid suddenly understanding mathematics.

‘Correct!’ cried the little man. ‘All right, then. Therefore we have the birth of incorrect semantic labels that can be used to describe anything from a hen’s nest to a motor-beetle crankcase. A doohingey can be the name of a scrub mop or a toupee. It’s a term used freely by everybody in a certain culture. A doohingey isn’t just one thing. It’s a thousand things.

‘Well, now, what I have done is form into energy the combined total of all things a doohingey has ever referred to. I have entered the minds of innumerable civilised humans, extracted their opinion of what *they* call a doohingey, what *they* call a thingum, and created from raw atomic energy a physical contraption of those mentally incorrect labellings. In other words, my inventions are three-dimensional representations of a semantic idea. Since the minds of people make a doohingey anything from a carpet sweeper to a number-nine-size nut-and-bolt, *my* inventions follow the same pattern. The doohingey you carried home today could do almost anything you would want it to do. Many of the inventions have robotlike functions, due to the fact that the abilities of movement, thought and mechanical versatility were included in them.’

‘They can do everything?’

‘Well, not everything. Most of the inventions have about sixty different processes, all alien, all mixed, all shapes, sizes, moulded into them. Each one of my creations has a different set of services. Some are big. Some small. Some of the big ones have many, many services. The small ones have only one or two simple functions. No two are alike. Think of the space and time and money you save by buying a doohingey!’

‘Yeah,’ said Crowell. He thought about Bishop’s body. ‘Your doohingey is certainly versatile, all right.’

‘That reminds me,’ said the little man. ‘About that 1944 model hinkie you sold me in trade. Where did you get it?’

‘Get it? You mean that pipe cle—I mean, the hinkie? I—Oh, well, I--’

‘You don’t have to be secretive. We share trade secrets, you know. Did you make it yourself?’

‘I... I bought it and worked on it. The ... the power of thought, you know.’

‘Then you *know* the secret? How astonishing! I thought I was the only one who knew about the transmission of thought into energy forms. Brilliant man. Did you study in Rruhe?’

‘No. I was always sorry I never got there. Never had the opportunity. I had to struggle along alone. Look, I’d like to turn this doohingey in for another apparatus. I don’t like it.’

‘You don’t like it? Why not?’

‘Oh I just don’t. Too cumbersome. Give me something simple every time.’

Yeah, simple, he thought, something you can see how it works.

‘What kind of machine do you want this time, Mr Crowell?’

‘Give me a ... gadget.’

‘What year gadget?’

‘Does that make a great deal of difference, what year?’

‘Oh, you’re joking again, aren’t you?’

Crowell swallowed. ‘I’m joking.’

‘You know, of course, that in each year for thousands of years the type of gadget and the name for a gadget would be different. A thingooey of the year 1965 would be an oddsblodkins in 1492. Or an ettubrutus in the days of Caesar.’

‘Are *you* joking?’ asked Crowell. ‘No. Never mind. Give me my gadget and I’ll go home.’

That word ‘home’ startled Crowell. It wouldn’t be wise to go there just yet. Hide out for a while until he could send a message to the bodyguards saying that he was holding Bishop prisoner. Yes. That was it. That was safest.

In the meantime he was curious about this shop, but not curious enough to have horrible contraptions like that doohingey near him. The little man was talking:

‘I’ve a whole case full of thingumabobs from all historical periods I’ll give you,’ he was saying. ‘I’m so overstocked with stuff, and nobody but you takes me seriously so far. I haven’t made one sale today. It’s quite saddening.’

Crowell felt sorry for the man, but—‘Tell you what. I’ve got an empty storage room in my house. Send the stuff around in a few days and I’ll look it over and take what I like.’

‘Can’t you take some of it with you now?’ pleaded the little man.

‘I don’t think I can—’

‘Oh, it’s small. Very small stuff. Really. Here. I’ll show you. A few little boxes of trinkets and knickknacks. Here. Here they are.’ He bent behind a counter, brought out six boxes, enough to load Crowell’s arms up to the chin.

Crowell opened one box. ‘Sure. I’ll take these. Nothing but soup strainers, paring knives, lemon juicers, doorknobs and old meerschaum pipes from Holland. Sure, I’ll take *these*.’ They looked safe. They were small, simple. Nothing wrong with them.

‘Oh, thank you. Thank you. Put these in the back of your beetle, gratis. I’m glad to clean them out of the store. I’ve done so much energy creating in the last few years or so I’ll be relieved to get rid of them. Sick and tired of looking at them. There you go.’

Crowell, his arms full, staggered out to his white beetle and tossed the stuff in the back seat. He waved to the little man, said he'd see him again in a few days, and drove off.

The hour spent in the shop, the gibbering joy of the little man, the bright lights, had made him forget, for the time, about Bishop's bodyguards and Bishop himself.

The beetle car hummed under him. He headed downtown towards the Audio studios, trying to decide what was wisest to do. He reached back, curiously, and pulled out one of the little gadgets. It was nothing more nor less than a pipe. Seeing it made him hungry for a smoke, so he took the pipe, filled it with makings from his blouse pouch, and lit it, experimentally, carefully. He puffed smoke. Fine. A good pipe.

He was busy enjoying the pipe when he noticed something in the rear-view mirror. He was being followed by two black beetle cars. No mistaking those low ebony high-powered crawlers.

He cursed silently and put on speed. The beetles were catching up with him, gaining speed every instant. There were two thugs in one of them, and two in the other.

'I'll stop and tell them that I'm holding their boss as hostage,' said Crowell to himself.

There were guns gleaming in the hands of the thugs in the black cars.

Crowell realised that they would shoot first and talk later. He hadn't planned that. He had planned on hiding away and calling them and giving them his ultimatum. But—*this*! They were coming after him. He wouldn't have a chance to explain before they'd shoot him down.

He increased the speed with his foot. Sweat came out to play on his forehead. What a mess. He was beginning to wish he hadn't returned the doohingey to the shop. He could use it now, just as he had inadvertently used it on Bishop.

Doohingey! Gadgets!

Crowell cried out in relief. Maybe—

He reached into the back seat and scrabbled wildly among the litter of gadgets. None of them looked like they could do anything, but he'd try, anyhow.

‘OK, you thingums, do your stuff! Protect me, damn you!’

There was a rattling crisp noise and something metallic thumped past Crowell's ears, winged outside on transparent glass wings back in the direction of the pursuing enemy car and hit it head on.

There was an explosion of green fire and grey smoke.

The fraltamoret had done its work. It was a combination of a little boy's automatic aeroplane and an explosive projectile.

Crowell pressed the floor plate and shot his beetle ahead again. The second car was still pursuing. They wouldn't give up.

‘Get them!’ cried Crowell. ‘Get them, too! Get them any way you can!’ He dumped two boxes of trinkets out of the window. Several of them took flight. The others bounced harmlessly on the cement.

Two missiles glittered in the air. They looked like old-fashioned pinking shears, sharp and bright, and an antigravity main-mechanistic drive attached. They sang along the boulevard until they got to the remaining black beetle car.

They went in through the open windows gleaming.

The black beetle car lost its control and went off the avenue, turning over and over, smashing, and bursting into a sudden savage fire.

Crowell slumped in his seat. He let the beetle slow down and pull around a corner and over to the kerb, stopping. He was breathing fast. His heart crashed.

He could go home now, if he wanted to. There would be no one else waiting for him at home, waiting to ambush him, stop him, question him, threaten him.

He could go home now. Funny, but he didn't feel relieved or happy. He just felt dark, unhappy, ill at ease. The world was a lousy place to live in. He had a bitter taste in his mouth.

He drove home. Well, maybe things would be better. Maybe.

He took the remaining boxes of trinkets and got out of the beetle and took the vac-elevator upstairs. He opened the door and laid the boxes down and sorted through them.

He still had that pipe in his mouth, after all the excitement. He had picked it up automatically and put it back in his mouth. He was nervous. Needed another smoke now to quiet his mind.

He put fresh tobacco in his new pipe and puffed it into life. That little man was a screw for giving him all this stuff. Dangerous to have this sort of knowledge lying around in the world. All kinds of wrong people might get hold of it, use it.

He laughed and puffed at his pipe.

From now on, he'd play big shot. With the help of the little man and the shop, he'd make those big Plastics officials jump, pay him money, obey his every thought. Damn them.

It sounded like a lot of trouble, though. He sat down and scowled and brooded about it and his thoughts got dark, like they had been for so many years. Pessimistic.

What was the use of trying to do anything in this world? Why did he bother to go on living? He got so tired.

Sometimes, like tonight and so many nights in the long years, he felt that it might be a good idea if those gunmen caught up with him and filled him full

of paralysis. Sometimes, if he had a gun in his own fingers, *he'd blast his brains out.*

There was a sharp explosion. Crowell stood up suddenly. He stiffened and fell down on his knees.

He'd forgotten about the pipe in his mouth—forgotten it was a thingumabob gadget.

It took an unpleasantly fatal way of reminding him.

NOT BY ITS COVER

Philip K. Dick

Ancient manuscripts, documents and books are another almost essential ingredient in works of comic fantasy—and there are few writers better qualified to write about this element of the tradition than Philip K. Dick (1928—1982), who is today regarded as one of the most idiosyncratic writers ever to have worked in the genre. Some years ago, he confessed that reading the classical Greek tragedy The Bacchae by Euripides was ‘one of the great formative forces in my mental and spiritual life’ and it sparked his desire to create stories of illusion and unreal worlds. Like Terry Pratchett, he was also an admirer of Kenneth Grahame and in an interview in 1980 drew a number of interesting parallels between the use of messianic figures such as Pan and Dionysos in both Grahame’s work and that of Euripides.

Dick, a burly, bearded figure who became notorious in the Sixties for his fascination with hallucinogenic drugs which he featured extensively in his stories at the time, combined running a record store and a classical music programme on a radio station in California with writing the short stories and novels which soon made him a cult figure with readers on both sides of the Atlantic. His first published story, ‘Beyond Lies the Wub’ (1952), was a clear indication of the ironic and often comic style that would become his trademark and which reached its heights in Dr Bloodmoney: or How We Got Along After the Bomb (1965); Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said (1974), winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award; and Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? which was filmed by Ridley Scott in 1982 as Blade Runner starring Harrison Ford. ‘Not By Its Cover’ is very much in this tradition and appeared originally in the summer 1968 edition of Famous Science Fiction from which it is reprinted here.

* * * *

The elderly, cross-tempered president of Obelisk Books said irritably, ‘I don’t want to see him, Miss Handy. The item is already in print; if there’s an error in the text we can’t do anything about it now.’

‘But Mr Masters,’ Miss Handy said, ‘it’s such an important error, sir. If he’s right. Mr Brandice claims that the entire chapter—’

‘I read his letter; I also talked to him on the vidphone. I know what he claims.’ Masters walked to the window of his office, gazed moodily out at the arid, crater-marred surface of Mars which he had witnessed so many decades. *Five thousand copies printed and bound, he thought. And of that, half in gold-stamped Martian wub-fur. The most elegant, expensive material we could locate. We were already losing money on the edition, and now this.*

On his desk lay a copy of the book, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, in the lofty, noble John Dryden translation. Angrily, Barney Masters turned the crisp white pages. Who would expect anyone on Mars to know such an ancient text that well? he reflected. And the man waiting in the outer office consisted of only one out of eight who had written or called Obelisk Books about a disputed passage.

Disputed? There was no contest; the eight local Latin scholars were right. It was simply a question of getting them to depart quietly, to forget they had ever read through the Obelisk edition and found the fnugled up passage in question.

Touching the button of his desk intercom, Masters said to his receptionist, ‘Okay; send him.’ Otherwise the man would never leave; his type would stay parked outside. Scholars were generally like that; they seemed to have infinite patience.

The door opened and a tall grey-haired man, wearing old-fashioned Terra-style glasses, loomed, briefcase in hand. ‘Thank you, Mr Masters,’ he said, entering. ‘Let me explain, sir, why my organisation considers an error such as this so important.’ He seated himself by the desk, unzipped his briefcase briskly. ‘We are after all a colony planet. All our values, mores, artefacts and customs come to us from Terra. WODAFAG considers your printing of this book .. .’

‘ “WODAFAG”?’ Masters interrupted. He had never heard of it, but even so he groaned. Obviously one of the many vigilant crank outfits who scanned

everything printed, either emanating locally here on Mars or arriving from Terra.

‘Watchmen Over Distortion and Forged Artefacts Generally,’ Brandice explained. ‘I have with me an authentic, correct Terran edition of *De Rerum Natura*—the Dryden translation, as is your local edition.’ His emphasis on *local* made it sound slimy and second-rate; as if, Masters brooded, Obelisk Books was doing something unsavoury in printing books at all. ‘Let us consider the inauthentic interpolations. You are urged to study first my copy —’ He laid a battered, elderly, Terran-printed book open on Masters’ desk. ‘—in which it appears correctly. And then, sir, a copy of your own edition; the same passage.’ Beside the little ancient blue book he laid one of the handsome large wub-fur bound copies which Obelisk Books had turned out.

‘Let me get my copy-editor in here,’ Masters said. Pressing the intercom button he said to Miss Handy, ‘Ask Jack Snead to step in here, please.’

‘Yes, Mr Masters.’

‘To quote from the authentic edition,’ Brandice said, ‘we obtain a metric rendering of the Latin as follows. Ahem.’ He cleared his throat self-consciously, then began to read aloud.

‘From sense of grief and pain we shall be free;

We shall not feel, because we shall not be.

Though earth in seas, and seas in heaven were lost,

We should not move, we only should be toss’d.’

‘I know the passage,’ Masters said sharply, feeling needled; the man was lecturing him as if he were a child.

‘This quatrain,’ Brandice said, ‘is absent from your edition, and the following spurious quatrain—of God knows what origin—appears in its place. Allow me.’ Taking the sumptuous, wub-fur bound Obelisk copy, he thumbed through, found the place; then read.

‘From sense of grief and pain we shall be free;

Which earth-bound man can neither qualify nor see.

Once dead, we fathom seas cast up from this:

Our stint on earth doth herald an unstopping bliss.’

Glaring at Masters, Brandice closed the wub-fur bound copy noisily. ‘What is most annoying,’ Brandice said, ‘is that this quatrain preaches a message diametric to that of the entire book. Where did it come from? *Somebody* had to write it; Dryden didn’t write it—Lucretius didn’t.’ He eyed Masters as if he thought Masters personally had done it.

The office door opened and the firm’s copy-editor, Jack Snead, entered. ‘He’s right,’ he said resignedly to his employer. ‘And it’s only one alteration in the text out of thirty or so; I’ve been ploughing through the whole thing, since the letters started arriving. And now I’m starting in on other recent catalogue-items in our fall list.’ He added, grunting, ‘I’ve found alterations in several of them, too.’

Masters said, ‘You were the last editor to proofread the copy before it went to the typesetters. Were these errors in it then?’

‘Absolutely not,’ Snead said. ‘And I proofread the galleys personally; the changes weren’t in the galleys, either. The changes don’t appear until the final bound copies come into existence—if that makes any sense. Or more specifically, the ones bound *in* gold and wub-fur. The regular bound-in-boards copies—they’re okay.’

Masters blinked. ‘But they’re all the same edition. They ran through the presses together. In fact we didn’t originally plan an exclusive, higher-priced binding; it was only at the last minute that we talked it over and the business office suggested half the edition be offered in wub-fur.’

‘I think,’ Jack Snead said, ‘we’re going to have to do some close-scrutiny work on the subject of Martian wub-fur.’

An hour later ageing, tottering Masters, accompanied by copy-editor Jack Snead, sat facing Luther Saperstein, business agent for the pelt-procuring firm of Flawless, Incorporated; from them, Obelisk Books had obtained the wub-fur with which their books had been bound.

‘First of all,’ Masters said in a brisk, professional tone, ‘what is wub-fur?’

‘Basically,’ Saperstein said, ‘in the sense in which you’re asking the question, it is fur from the Martian wub. I know this doesn’t tell you much, gentlemen, but at least it’s a reference point, a postulate on which we can all agree, where we can start and build something more imposing. To be more helpful, let me fill you in on the nature of the wub itself. The fur is prized because, among other reasons, it is rare. Wub-fur is rare because a wub very seldom dies. By that I mean, it is next to impossible to slay a wub—even a sick or old wub. And, even though a wub is killed, the hide lives on. That quality imparts its unique value to home-decoration, or, as in your case, in the binding of lifetime, treasured books meant to endure.’

Masters sighed, dully gazed out of the window as Saperstein droned on. Beside him, his copy-editor made brief cryptic notes, a dark expression on his youthful, energetic face.

‘What we supplied you,’ Saperstein said, ‘when you came to us—and remember: you came to us; we didn’t seek you out—consisted of the most select, perfect hides in our giant inventory. These living hides shine with a unique lustre all their own; nothing else either on Mars or back home on Terra resembles them. If torn or scratched, the hide repairs itself. It grows, over the months, a more and more lush pile, so that the covers of your volumes become progressively luxurious, and hence highly sought-after. Ten years from now the deep-pile quality of these wub-fur bound books—’

Interrupting, Snead said, ‘So the hide is still alive. Interesting. And the wub, as you say, is so deft as to be virtually impossible to kill.’ He shot a swift glance at Masters. ‘Every single one of the thirty-odd alterations made in the texts in our books deals with immortality. The Lucretius revision is typical; the original text teaches that man is temporary, that even if he survives after death it doesn’t matter because he won’t have any memory of his existence here. In place of that, the spurious new passages come out and flatly talk

about a future of life predicated on this one; as you say, at complete variance with Lucretius' entire philosophy. You realise what we're seeing, don't you? The damn wub's philosophy superimposed on that of the various authors. That's it; beginning and end.' He broke off, resumed his note-scratching, silently.

'How can a hide,' Masters demanded, 'even a perpetually living one, exert influence on the contents of a book? A text already printed—pages cut, folios glued and sewn—it's against reason. Even *if* the binding, the damn hide, is really alive, and I can hardly believe that.' He glared at Saperstein. 'If it's alive, what does it live on?'

'Minute particles of food-stuffs in suspension in the atmosphere,' Saperstein said, blandly.

Rising to his feet, Masters said, 'Let's go. This is ridiculous.'

'It inhales the particles,' Saperstein said, 'through its pores.' His tone was dignified, even reproving.

Studying his notes, not rising along with his employer, Jack Snead said thoughtfully, 'Some of the amended texts are fascinating. They vary from a complete reversal of the original passage—and the author's meaning—as in the case of Lucretius, to very subtle, almost invisible corrections—if that's the word—to texts more in accord with the doctrine of eternal life. The real question is this. Are we faced merely with the opinion of one particular life form, *or does the wub know what it's talking about?* Lucretius' poem, for instance; it's very great, very beautiful, very interesting—as poetry. But as philosophy, maybe it's wrong. I don't know. It's not my job; I simply edit books; I don't write them. The last thing a good copy-editor does is editorialise, on his own, in the author's text. But that is what the wub, or anyhow the post-wub pelt, is doing.' He was silent, then.

Saperstein said, 'I'd be interested to know if it added anything of value.'

'Poetically? Or do you mean philosophically? From a poetic or literary, stylistic point of view its interpolations are no better and no worse than the originals; it manages to blend in with the author well enough so that if you

didn't know the text already you'd never notice.' He added broodingly, 'You'd never know it was a pelt talking.'

'I meant from a philosophical point of view.'

'Well, it's always the same message, monotonously ground out. There is no death. We go to sleep; we wake up—to a better life. What it did to *De Rerum Natura*; that's typical. If you've read that you've read them all.'

'It would be an interesting experiment,' Masters said thoughtfully, 'to bind a copy of the Bible in wub-fur.'

'I had that done,' Snead said.

'And?'

'Of course I couldn't take time to read it all. But I did glance over Paul's letters to the Corinthians. It made only one change. The passage that begins, "Behold, I tell you a mystery—" it set all of that in caps. And it repeated the lines, "Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?" ten times straight; ten whole times, all in caps. Obviously the wub agreed; that's its own philosophy, or rather theology.' He said, then, weighing each word, 'This basically is a theological dispute ... between the reading public and the hide of a Martian animal that looks like a fusion between a hog and a cow. Strange.' Again he returned to his notes.

After a solemn pause, Masters said, 'You think the wub has inside information or don't you? As you said, this may not be just the opinion of one particular animal that's been successful in avoiding death; it may be the truth.'

'What occurs to me,' Snead said, 'is this. The wub hasn't merely learned to avoid death; it's actually done what it preaches. By getting killed, skinned, and its hide—still alive—made into book covers— it has conquered death. It lives on. In what it appears to regard as a better life. We're not just dealing with an opinionated local life form; we're dealing with an organism that has already done what we're still in doubt about. Sure it knows. It's a living

confirmation of its own doctrine. The facts speak for themselves. I tend to believe it.'

'Maybe continual life for *it*,' Masters disagreed, 'but that doesn't mean necessarily for the rest of us. The wub, as Mr Saperstein points out, is unique. The hide of no other life form either on Mars or on Luna or Terra lives on, imbibing life from microscopic particles in suspension in the atmosphere. Just because *it* can do it—'

'Too bad we can't communicate with a wub hide,' Saperstein said. 'We've tried, here at Flawless, ever since we first noticed the fact of its post-mortem survival. But we never found a way.'

'But we at Obelisk,' Snead pointed out, 'have. As a matter of fact I've already tried an experiment. I had a one-sentence text printed up, a single line reading: "The wub, unlike every other living creature, is immortal."

'I then had it bound in wub-fur; then I read it again. It had been changed. Here.' He passed a slim book, handsomely appointed, to Masters. 'Read it as it is now.'

Masters read aloud: 'The wub, like every other living creature, is immortal.'

Returning the copy to Snead he said, 'Well, all it did was drop out the *un*; that's not much of a change, two letters.'

'But from the standpoint of meaning,' Snead said, 'it constitutes a bombshell. We're getting feedback from beyond the grave—so to speak. I mean, let's face it; wub-fur is technically dead because the wub that grew it is dead. This is awfully damn close to providing an indisputable verification of the survival of sentient life after death.'

'Of course there is one thing,' Saperstein said hesitantly. 'I hate to bring it up; I don't know what bearing it has on all this. But the Martian wub, for all its uncanny—even miraculous—ability to preserve itself, is from a mental standpoint a stupid creature. A Terran opossum, for example, has a brain one-third that of a cat. The wub has a brain one-fifth that of an opossum.' He looked gloomy.

‘Well,’ Snead said, ‘the Bible says, “The last shall be the first.” Possibly the lowly wub is included under this rubric; let’s hope so.’

Glancing at him, Masters said, ‘You *want* eternal life?’

‘Certainly,’ Snead said. ‘Everybody does.’

‘Not I,’ Masters said, with decisiveness. ‘I have enough troubles now. The last thing I want is to live on as the binding of a book— or in any fashion whatsoever.’ But inside, he had begun silently to muse. Differently. Very differently, in fact.

‘It sounds like something a wub would like,’ Saperstein agreed. ‘Being the binding of a book; just lying there supine, on a shelf, year after year, inhaling minute particles from the air. And presumably meditating. Or whatever wubs do after they’re dead.’

‘They think theology,’ Snead said. ‘They preach.’ To his boss he said, ‘I assume we won’t be binding any more books in wub-fur.’

‘Not for trade purposes,’ Masters agreed. ‘Not to sell. But...’ He could not rid himself of the conviction that some use lay here. ‘I wonder,’ he said, ‘if it would impart the same high level of survival factor to anything it was made into. Such as window drapes. Or upholstery in a float-car; maybe it would eliminate death on the commute paths. Or helmet-liners for combat troops. And for baseball players.’ The possibilities, to him, seemed enormous . . . but vague. He would have to think this out, give it a good deal of time.

‘Anyhow,’ Saperstein said, ‘my firm declines to give you a refund; the characteristics of wub-fur were known publicly in a brochure which we published earlier this year. We categorically stated—’

‘Okay, it’s our loss,’ Masters said irritably, with a wave of his hand. ‘Let it go.’ To Snead he said, ‘And it definitely says, in the thirty-odd passages it’s interpolated, that life after death is pleasant?’

‘Absolutely. “Our stint on earth doth herald an unstopping bliss.” That sums it up, that line it stuck into *De Rerum Natura*; it’s all right there.’

“Bliss,” Masters echoed, nodding. ‘Of course, we’re actually not on Earth; we’re on Mars. But I suppose it’s the same thing; it just means life, wherever it’s lived.’ Again, even more gravely, he pondered. ‘What occurs to me,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘is it’s one thing to talk abstractly about “life after death”. People have been doing that for fifty thousand years; Lucretius was, two thousand years ago. What interests me more is not the big overall philosophical picture but the concrete fact of the wub-pelt; the immortality which it carried around with it.’ To Snead he said, ‘What other books did you bind in it?’

‘Tom Paine’s *Age of Reason*,’ Snead said, consulting his list.

‘What were the results?’

‘Two hundred and sixty-seven blank pages. Except right in the middle the one word *bleh*.’

‘Continue.’

‘The *Britannica*. It didn’t precisely change anything, but it added whole articles. On the soul, on transmigration, on hell, damnation, sin, or immortality; the whole twenty-four volume set became religiously orientated.’ He glanced up. ‘Should I go on?’

‘Sure,’ Masters said, listening and meditating simultaneously.

‘The *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas. It left the text intact, but it periodically inserted the biblical line, “The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life.” Over and over again.

‘James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*. Shangri-La turns out to be a vision of the afterlife which—’

‘Okay,’ Masters said. ‘We get the idea. The question is, what can we do with this? Obviously we can’t bind books with it—at least books which it disagrees with.’ But he was beginning to see another use; a much more personal one. And it far outweighed anything which the wub-fur might do for or to books—in fact for any inanimate object.

As soon as he got to a phone—

‘Of special interest,’ Snead was saying, ‘is its reaction to a volume of collected papers on psychoanalysis by some of the greatest living Freudian analysts of our time. It allowed each article to remain intact, but at the end of each it added the same phrase.’ He chuckled. ‘ “Physician, heal thyself”. Bit of a sense of humour, there.’

‘Yeah,’ Masters said. Thinking, unceasingly, of the phone and the one vital call which he would make.

Back in his own office at Obelisk Books, Masters tried out a preliminary experiment—to see if his idea would work. Carefully, he wrapped a Royal Albert yellow bone-china cup and saucer in wub-fur, a favourite from his own personal collection. Then, after much soul-searching and trepidation, he placed the bundle on the floor of his office and, with all his declining might, stepped on it.

The cup did not break. At least it did not seem to.

He unwrapped the package, then, and inspected the cup. He had been right; wrapped in living wub-fur it could not be destroyed.

Satisfied, he seated himself at his desk, pondered one last time.

The wrapper of wub-fur had made a temporary, fragile object imperishable. So the wub’s doctrine of external survival had worked itself out in practice—exactly as he had expected.

He picked up the phone, dialled his lawyer’s number.

‘This is about my will,’ he said to his lawyer, when he had him on the other end of the line. ‘You know, the latest one I made out a few months ago. I have an additional clause to insert.’

‘Yes, Mr Masters,’ his lawyer said briskly. ‘Shoot.’

‘A small item,’ Masters purred. ‘Has to do with my coffin. I want it mandatory on my heirs—my coffin is to be lined throughout, top, bottom and

sides, with wub-fur. From Flawless, Incorporated. I want to go to my Maker clothed, so to speak, in wub-fur. Makes a better impression that way.' He laughed nonchalantly, but his tone was deadly serious—and his attorney caught it.

'If that's what you want,' the attorney said.

'And I suggest you do the same,' Masters said.

'Why?'

Masters said, 'Consult the complete home medical reference library we're going to issue next month. And make certain you get a copy that's bound in wub-fur; it'll be different from the others.' He thought, then, about his wub-fur-lined coffin once again. Far underground, with him inside it, with the living wub-fur growing, growing.

It would be interesting to see the version of himself which a choice wub-fur binding produced.

Especially after several centuries.

THE RULE OF NAMES

Ursula K. Le Guin

The character of the wizard, the wonder-worker of magic, has probably been the most important figure in all the great tales of fantasy: especially the various series of books by writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and, of course, Terry Pratchett. To this list must be added the Earthsea Trilogy by Ursula K. Le Guin in which she created a magical world complete with its own history, geography, language, people and customs which has been acclaimed by critics and readers alike. The three works which make up the trilogy, A Wizard of Earthsea (1968), The Tombs of Atuan (1972) and The Farthest Shore (1972), were even provided with detailed maps to help the reader find the locations of the various episodes—an element now commonplace in fantasy fiction.

The creator of Earthsea, Ursula Kroeber Le Guin (1929-), has credited the works of Lord Dunsany with generating her interest in imaginary worlds and providing the direction for her literary career which has now made her one of the most honoured writers in the genre. An American-born graduate who specialised in the romance languages, she wrote her first series of tales set in an imaginary country while still a child, but came to public notice with her amusing space opera, Rocannon's World, published in 1966. What stamped her as a writer of truly original talent, however, was the appearance three years later of The Left Hand of Darkness, a richly imaginative tale about an extraterrestrial world called Gethen which is perpetually snow-bound and whose people have the ability to make themselves either male or female. The book won her the Hugo and Nebula Awards as well as a place in the front rank of modern writers which she has continued to maintain in her subsequent works of fantasy.

The Earthsea Trilogy, in contrast, is set in an exotic ocean world in a cluster of islands, and concerns the training and subsequent exploits of a magician named Ged. For those not familiar with the books 'The Rule of Names' may provide an ideal introduction, for it was written in 1964 prior to the first full-length novel and is one of only two short stories that the author has written about her world of wizardry. Even those readers who

are familiar with the trilogy will undoubtedly find in this precursor to a publishing legend an irresistible blend of humour and magic.

* * * *

Mr Underhill came out from under his hill, smiling and breathing hard. Each breath shot out of his nostrils as a double puff of steam, snow-white in the morning sunshine. Mr Underhill looked up at the bright December sky and smiled wider than ever, showing snow-white teeth. Then he went down to the village.

‘Morning, Mr Underhill,’ said the villagers as he passed them in the narrow street between houses with conical, overhanging roofs like the fat red caps of toadstools. ‘Morning, morning!’ he replied to each. (It was of course bad luck to wish anyone a *good* morning; a simple statement of the time of day was quite enough, in a place so permeated with Influences as Sattins Island, where a careless adjective might change the weather for a week.) All of them spoke to him, some with affection, some with affectionate disdain. He was all the little island had in the way of a wizard, and so deserved respect—but how could you respect a little fat man of fifty who waddled along with his toes turned in, breathing steam and smiling? He was no great shakes as a workman either. His fireworks were fairly elaborate but his elixirs were weak. Warts he charmed off frequently reappeared after three days; tomatoes he enchanted grew no bigger than cantaloupes; and those rare times when a strange ship stopped at Sattins harbour, Mr Underhill always stayed under his hill—for fear, he explained, of the evil eye. He was, in other words, a wizard the way wall-eyed Gan was a carpenter: by default. The villagers made do with badly hung doors and inefficient spells, for this generation, and relieved their annoyance by treating Mr Underhill quite familiarly, as a mere fellow-villager. They even asked him to dinner. Once he asked some of them to dinner, and served a splendid repast, with silver, crystal, damask, roast goose, sparkling Andrades ‘639, and plum pudding with hard sauce; but he was so nervous all through the meal that it took the joy out of it, and besides, everybody was hungry again half an hour afterwards. He did not like anyone to visit his cave, not even the anteroom, beyond which in fact nobody had ever got. When he saw people approaching the hill he always came trotting to meet them. ‘Let’s sit out here under the pine trees!’ he would say, smiling

and waving towards the fir-grove, or if it was raining, 'Let's go and have a drink at the inn, eh?' though everybody knew he drank nothing stronger than well-water.

Some of the village children, teased by that locked cave, poked and pried and made raids while Mr Underhill was away; but the small door that led into the inner chamber was spell-shut, and it seemed for once to be an effective spell. Once a couple of boys, thinking the wizard was over on the West Shore curing Mrs Ruuna's sick donkey, brought a crowbar and a hatchet up there, but at the first whack of the hatchet on the door there came a roar of wrath from inside, and a cloud of purple steam. Mr Underhill had got home early. The boys fled. He did not come out, and the boys came to no harm, though they said you couldn't believe what a huge hooting howling hissing horrible bellow that little fat man could make unless you'd heard it.

His business in town this day was three dozen fresh eggs and a pound of liver; also a stop at Seacaptain Fogeno's cottage to renew the seeing-charm on the old man's eyes (quite useless when applied to a case of detached retina, but Mr Underhill kept trying), and finally a chat with old Goody Guld the concertina-maker's widow. Mr Underhill's friends were mostly old people. He was timid with the strong young men of the village, and the girls were shy of him. 'He makes me nervous, he smiles so much,' they all said, pouting, twisting silky ringlets round a finger. 'Nervous' was a newfangled word, and their mothers all replied grimly, 'Nervous my foot, silliness is the word for it. Mr Underhill is a very respectable wizard!'

After leaving Goody Guld, Mr Underhill passed by the school, which was being held this day out on the common. Since no one on Sattins Island was literate, there were no books to learn to read from and no desks to carve initials on and no blackboards to erase, and in fact no schoolhouse. On rainy days the children met in the loft of the Communal Barn, and got hay in their pants; on sunny days the schoolteacher, Palani, took them anywhere she felt like. Today, surrounded by thirty interested children under twelve and forty uninterested sheep under five, she was teaching an important item on the curriculum: the Rules of Names. Mr Underhill, smiling shyly, paused to listen and watch. Palani, a plump, pretty girl of twenty, made a charming picture there in the wintry sunlight, sheep and children around her, a leafless oak

above her, and behind her the dunes and sea and clear, pale sky. She spoke earnestly, her face flushed pink by wind and words. 'Now you know the Rules of Names already, children. There are two, and they're the same on every island in the world. What's one of them?'

'It ain't polite to ask anybody what his name is,' shouted a fat, quick boy, interrupted by a little girl shrieking, 'You can't never tell your own name to nobody my ma says!'

'Yes, Suba. Yes, Popi dear, don't screech. That's right. You never ask anybody his name. You never tell your own. Now think about that a minute and then tell me why we call our wizard Mr Underhill.' She smiled across the curly heads and the woolly backs at Mr Underhill, who beamed, and nervously clutched his sack of eggs.

'Cause he lives under a hill!' said half the children.

'But is it his truename?'

'No!' said the fat boy, echoed by little Popi shrieking, 'No!'

'How do you know it's not?'

'Cause he came here all alone and so there wasn't anybody knew his truename so they could not tell us, and *he* couldn't—'

'Very good, Suba. Popi, don't shout. That's right. Even a wizard can't tell his truename. When you children are through school and go through the Passage, you'll leave your child-names behind and keep only your truenames, which you must never ask for and never give away. Why is that the rule?'

The children were silent. The sheep bleated gently. Mr Underhill answered the question: 'Because the name is the thing,' he said in his shy, soft, husky voice, 'and the truename is the true thing. To speak the name is to control the thing. Am I right, Schoolmistress?'

She smiled and curtsied, evidently a little embarrassed by his participation. And he trotted off towards his hill, clutching the eggs to his bosom. Somehow

the minute spent watching Palani and the children had made him very hungry. He locked his inner door behind him with a hasty incantation, but there must have been a leak or two in the spell, for soon the bare anteroom of the cave was rich with the smell of frying eggs and sizzling liver.

The wind that day was light and fresh out of the west, and on it at noon a little boat came skimming the bright waves into Sattins harbour. Even as it rounded the point a sharp-eyed boy spotted it, and knowing, like every child on the island, every sail and spar of the forty boats of the fishing fleet, he ran down the street calling out, 'A foreign boat, a foreign boat!' Very seldom was the lonely isle visited by a boat from some equally lonely isle of the East Reach, or an adventurous trader from the Archipelago. By the time the boat was at the pier half the village was there to greet it, and fishermen were following it homewards, and cowherds and clamdiggers and herb-hunters were puffing up and down all the rocky hills, heading towards the harbour.

But Mr Underhill's door stayed shut.

There was only one man aboard the boat. Old Seacaptain Fogeno, when they told him that, drew down a bristle of white brows over his unseeing eyes. 'There's only one kind of man,' he said, 'that sails the Outer Reach alone. A wizard, or a warlock, or a Mage . . .'

So the villagers were breathless hoping to see for once in their lives a Mage, one of the mighty White Magicians of the rich, towered, crowded inner islands of the Archipelago. They were disappointed, for the voyager was quite young, a handsome black-bearded fellow who hailed them cheerfully from his boat, and leaped ashore like any sailor glad to have made port. He introduced himself at once as a sea-pedlar. But when they told Seacaptain Fogeno that he carried an oaken walking-stick around with him, the old man nodded. 'Two wizards in one town,' he said. 'Bad!' And his mouth snapped shut like an old carp's.

As the stranger could not give them his name, they gave him one right away: Blackbeard. And they gave him plenty of attention. He had a small mixed cargo of cloth and sandals and *piswi* feathers for trimming cloaks and cheap incense and levity stones and fine herbs and great glass beads from Venway—the usual pedlar's lot. Everyone on Sattins Island came to look, to chat

with the voyager, and perhaps to buy something—'Just to remember him by!' cackled Goody Guld, who like all the women and girls of the village was smitten with Blackbeard's bold good looks. All the boys hung round him too, to hear him tell of his voyages to far, strange islands of the Reach or describe the great rich islands of the Archipelago, the Inner Lanes, the roadsteads white with ships, and the golden roofs of Havnor. The men willingly listened to his tales; but some of them wondered why a trader should sail alone, and kept their eyes thoughtfully upon his oaken staff.

But all this time Mr Underhill stayed under his hill.

'This is the first island I've ever seen that had no wizard,' said Blackbeard one evening to Goody Guld, who had invited him and her nephew and Palani in for a cup of rushwash tea. 'What do you do when you get a toothache, or the cow goes dry?'

'Why, we've got Mr Underhill!' said the old woman.

'For what's that's worth,' muttered her nephew Birt, and then blushed purple and spilled his tea. Birt was a fisherman, a large, brave, wordless young man. He loved the schoolmistress, but the nearest he had come to telling her of his love was to give baskets of fresh mackerel to her father's cook.

'Oh, you do have a wizard?' Blackbeard asked. 'Is he invisible?'

'No, he's just very shy,' said Palani. 'You've only been here a week, you know, and we see so few strangers here...' She also blushed a little, but did not spill her tea.

Blackbeard smiled at her. 'He's a good Sattinsman, then, eh?'

'No,' said Goody Guld, 'no more than you are. Another cup, nevvvy? keep it in the cup this time. No, my dear, he came in a little bit of a boat, four years ago was it? just a day after the end of the shad run, I recall, for they was taking up the nets over in East Creek, and Pondi Cowherd broke his leg that very morning—five years ago it must be. No, four. No, five it is, 'twas the year the garlic didn't sprout. So he sails in on a bit of a sloop loaded full up with great chests and boxes and says to Seacaptain Fogeno, who wasn't blind

then, though old enough goodness knows to be blind twice over, “I hear tell,” he says, “you’ve got no wizard nor warlock at all, might you be wanting one?”—”Indeed, if the magic’s white!” says the Captain, and before you could say cuttlefish Mr Underhill had settled down in the cave under the hill and was charming the mange off Goody Beltow’s cat. Though the fur grew in grey, and ‘twas an orange cat. Queer-looking thing it was after that. It died last winter in the cold spell. Goody Beltow took on so at that cat’s death, poor thing, worse than when her man was drowned on the Long Banks, the year of the long herring-runs, when nevvvy Birt here was but a babe in petticoats.’ Here Birt spilled his tea again, and Blackbeard grinned, but Goody Guld proceeded undismayed, and talked on till nightfall.

Next day Blackbeard was down at the pier, seeing after the sprung board in his boat which he seemed to take a long time fixing, and as usual drawing the taciturn Sattinsmen into talk. ‘Now which of these is your wizard’s craft?’ he asked. ‘Or has he got one of those the Mages fold up into a walnut shell when they’re not using it?’

‘Nay,’ said a stolid fisherman. ‘She’s oop in his cave, under hill.’

‘He carried the boat he came in up to his cave?’

‘Aye. Clear oop. I helped. Heavier as lead she was. Full oop with great boxes, and they full oop with books o’ spells, he says. Heavier as lead she was.’ And the solid fisherman turned his back, sighing stolidly. Goody Guld’s nephew, mending a net nearby, looked up from his work and asked with equal stolidity, ‘Would ye like to meet Mr Underhill, maybe?’

Blackbeard returned Birt’s look. Clever black eyes met candid blue ones for a long moment; then Blackbeard smiled and said, ‘Yes. Will you take me up to the hill, Birt?’

‘Aye, when I’m done with this,’ said the fisherman. And when the net was mended, he and the Archipelagan set off up the village street towards the high green hill above it. But as they crossed the common Blackbeard said, ‘Hold on a while, friend Birt. I have a tale to tell you, before we meet your wizard.’

‘Tell away,’ says Birt, sitting down in the shade of a live-oak.

‘It’s a story that started a hundred years ago, and isn’t finished yet—though it soon will be, very soon ... In the very heart of the Archipelago, where the islands crowd thick as flies on honey, there’s a little isle called Pendor. The sealords of Pendor were mighty men, in the old days of war before the League. Loot and ransom and tribute came pouring into Pendor, and they gathered a great treasure there, long ago. Then from somewhere away out in the West Reach, where dragons breed on the lava isles, came one day a very mighty dragon. Not one of those overgrown lizards most of you Outer Reach folk call dragons, but a big, black, winged, wise, cunning monster, full of strength and subtlety, and like all dragons loving gold and precious stones above all things. He killed the Sealord and his soldiers, and the people of Pendor fled in their ships by night. They all fled away and left the dragon coiled up in Pendor Towers. And there he stayed for a hundred years, dragging his scaly belly over the emeralds and sapphires and coins of gold, coming forth only once in a year or two when he must eat. He’d raid nearby islands for his food. You know what dragons eat?’

Birt nodded and said in a whisper, ‘Maidens.’

‘Right,’ said Blackbeard. ‘Well, that couldn’t be endured forever, nor the thought of him sitting on all that treasure. So after the League grew strong, and the Archipelago wasn’t so busy with wars and piracy, it was decided to attack Pendor, drive out the dragon, and get the gold and jewels for the treasury of the League. They’re forever wanting money, the League is. So a huge fleet gathered from fifty islands, and seven Mages stood in the prows of the seven strongest ships, and they sailed towards Pendor...They got there. They landed. Nothing stirred. The houses all stood empty, the dishes on the tables full of a hundred years’ dust. The bones of the old Sealord and his men lay about in the castle courts and on the stairs. And the Tower rooms reeked of dragon. But there was no dragon. And no treasure, not a diamond the size of a poppyseed, not a single silver bead ... Knowing that he couldn’t stand up to seven Mages, the dragon had skipped out. They tracked him, and found he’d flown to a deserted island up north called Udrath; they followed his trail there, and what did they find? Bones again. His bones—the dragon’s. But no treasure. A wizard, some unknown wizard from somewhere, must have met him singlehanded, and defeated him—and then made off with the treasure, right under the League’s nose!’

The fisherman listened, attentive and expressionless.

‘Now that must have been a powerful wizard and a clever one, first to kill a dragon, and second to get off without leaving a trace. The lords and Mages of the Archipelago couldn’t track him at all, neither where he’d come from nor where he’d made off to. They were about to give up. That was last spring; I’d been off on a three-year voyage up in the North Reach, and got back about that time. And they asked me to help them find the unknown wizard. That was clever of them. Because I’m not only a wizard myself, as I think some of the oafs here have guessed, but I am also a descendant of the Lords of Pendor. That treasure is mine. It’s mine, and knows that it’s mine. Those fools of the League couldn’t find it, because it’s not theirs. It belongs to the House of Pendor, and the great emerald, the star of the hoard, Inalkil the Greenstone, knows its master. Behold!’ Blackbeard raised his oaken staff and cried aloud, ‘Inalkil!’ The tip of the staff began to glow green, a fiery green radiance, a dazzling haze the colour of April grass, and at the same moment the staff tipped in the wizard’s hand, leaning, slanting till it pointed straight at the side of the hill above them.

‘It wasn’t so bright a glow, far away in Havnor,’ Blackbeard murmured, ‘but the staff pointed true. Inalkil answered when I called. The jewel knows its master. And I know the thief, and I shall conquer him. He’s a mighty wizard, who could overcome a dragon. But I am mightier. Do you want to know why, oaf? Because I know his name!’

As Blackbeard’s tone got more arrogant, Birt had looked duller and duller, blanker and blanker; but at this he gave a twitch, shut his mouth, and stared at the Archipelagan. ‘How did you...learn it?’ he asked very slowly.

Blackbeard grinned, and did not answer.

‘Black magic?’

‘How else?’

Birt looked pale, and said nothing.

‘I am the Sealord of Pendor, oaf, and I will have the gold my fathers won, and the jewels my mothers wore, and the Greenstone! For they are mine.—Now, you can tell your village boobies the whole story after I have defeated this wizard and gone. Wait here. Or you can come and watch, if you’re not afraid. You’ll never get the chance again to see a great wizard in all his power.’ Blackbeard turned, and without a backward glance strode off up the hill towards the entrance to the cave.

Very slowly, Birt followed. A good distance from the cave he stopped, sat down under a hawthorn tree, and watched. The Archipelagan had stopped; a stiff, dark figure alone on the green swell of the hill before the gaping cave-mouth, he stood perfectly still. All at once he swung his staff up over his head, and the emerald radiance shone about him as he shouted, ‘Thief, thief of the Hoard of Pendor, come forth!’

There was a crash, as of dropped crockery, from inside the cave, and a lot of dust came spewing out. Scared, Birt ducked. When he looked again he saw Blackbeard still standing motionless, and at the mouth of the cave, dusty and dishevelled, stood Mr Underhill. He looked small and pitiful, with his toes turned in as usual, and his little bowlegs in black tights, and no staff—he never had had one, Birt suddenly thought. Mr Underhill spoke. ‘Who are you?’ he said in his husky little voice.

‘I am the Sealord of Pendor, thief, come to claim my treasure!’

At that, Mr Underhill slowly turned pink, as he always did when people were rude to him. But he then turned something else. He turned yellow. His hair bristled out, he gave a coughing roar—and was a yellow lion leaping down the hill at Blackbeard, white fangs gleaming.

But Blackbeard no longer stood there. A gigantic tiger, colour of night and lightning, bounded to meet the lion ...

The lion was gone. Below the cave all of a sudden stood a high grove of trees, black in the winter sunshine. The tiger, checking himself in mid-leap just before he entered the shadow of the trees, caught fire in the air, became a tongue of flame lashing out at the dry black branches ...

But where the trees had stood a sudden cataract leaped from the hillside, an arch of silvery crashing water, thundering down upon the fire. But the fire was gone . . .

For just a moment before the fisherman's staring eyes two hills rose—the green one he knew, and a new one, a bare, brown hillock ready to drink up the rushing waterfall. That passed so quickly it made Birt blink, and after blinking he blinked again, and moaned, for what he saw now was a great deal worse. Where the cataract had been there hovered a dragon. Black wings darkened all the hill, steel claws reached groping, and from the dark, scaly, gaping lips fire and steam shot out.

Beneath the monstrous creature stood Blackbeard, laughing.

‘Take any shape you please, little Mr Underhill!’ he taunted. ‘I can match you. But the game grows tiresome. I want to look upon my treasure, upon Inalkil. Now, big dragon, little wizard, take your true shape. I command you by the power of your truename— Yevaud!’

Birt could not move at all, not even to blink. He cowered staring whether he would or not. He saw the black dragon hang there in the air above Blackbeard. He saw the fire lick like many tongues from the scaly mouth, the steam jet from the red nostrils. He saw Blackbeard's face grow white, white as chalk, and the beard-fringed lips trembling.

‘Your name is Yevaud!’

‘Yes,’ said a great, husky, hissing voice. ‘My truename is Yevaud, and my true shape is this shape.’

‘But the dragon was killed—they found dragon-bones on Udrath Island—’

‘That was another dragon,’ said the dragon, and then stooped like a hawk, talons outstretched. And Birt shut his eyes.

When he opened them the sky was clear, the hillside empty, except for a reddish-blackish, trampled spot, and a few talon-marks in the grass.

Birt the fisherman got to his feet and ran. He ran across the common, scattering sheep to right and left, and straight down the village street to Palani's father's house. Palani was out in the garden weeding the nasturtiums. 'Come with me!' Birt gasped. She stared. He grabbed her wrist and dragged her with him. She screeched a little, but did not resist. He ran with her straight to the pier, pushed her into his fishing-sloop the *Queenie*, untied the painter, took up the oars and set off rowing like a demon. The last that Sattins Island saw of him and Palani was the *Queenie*'s sail vanishing in the direction of the nearest island westward.

The villagers thought they would never stop talking about it, how Goody Guld's nephew Birt had lost his mind and sailed off with the schoolmistress on the very same day that the pedlar Blackbeard disappeared without a trace, leaving all his feathers and beads behind. But they did stop talking about it, three days later. They had other things to talk about, when Mr Underhill finally came out of his cave.

Mr Underhill had decided that since his truenam was no longer a secret, he might as well drop his disguise. Walking was a lot harder than flying, and besides, it was a long, long time since he had had a real meal.

SWORDS AND SORCERY

Tales of Heroic Fantasy



MYTHOLOGICAL BEAST

Stephen Donaldson

Heroic Fantasy, which is sometimes referred to as 'Sword and Sorcery', has its current superstar in Stephen Donaldson (1947—) whose series, The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever, became a publishing sensation on both sides of the Atlantic when it was launched in 1977. The books were hailed as 'comparable to Tolkien at his best', underlining that here was another writer following in an already well-established tradition. Although stories of 'heroic fantasy' can be traced back to the ancient Greek voyages of discovery, it is generally accepted that the term 'Sword and Sorcery' was coined in 1960 by the American fantasy writer Fritz Leiber (of whom more later) to categorise the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and T. H. White (The Once and Future King trilogy) at one end of the spectrum and, at the other, Edgar Rice Burroughs (the 'Barsoom' series) and Robert E. Howard (Conan the Barbarian). Inevitably, these stories of vivid imagination, set primarily in fantasy worlds where swordsmen and adventurers big and small pitted themselves against supernatural foes, were full of heroism and bloodshed. Humour was almost non-existent—although, as this section will demonstrate, the genre did lend itself to comic fantasy in the form of vulnerable heroes in less-than-heroic situations.

Stephen Donaldson's Chronicles typify this shift in the heroic fantasy genre by having as their principal character a leper. The author developed the idea during his childhood spent in India where his father was an orthopaedic surgeon working extensively with lepers; it was from this that he conceived the character of Thomas Covenant. The first trilogy of Chronicles was completed ten years later, after he had returned to America and gone through college (getting an M.A. in English). The huge manuscript was then turned down by 47 publishers before finding a home with Ballantine Books, Tolkien's publishers in America. The immediate success of the work in the United States was followed just as quickly in Britain where the books sold almost half a million copies in just eighteen months.

Since then Donaldson has produced a string of what he refers to as 'operatic fantasies', describing strange, beautiful, uncanny landscapes where, despite an ever-present sense of doom, his particular brand of wild magic offers hope—the very essence of heroic fantasy. 'Mythological Beast' is one of his few short stories and was published in the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction in January 1979. In it he makes amusing use of a classic fantasy theme against the backdrop of a technocracy of the future, to weave a story that neatly encapsulates the theme of this section.

* * * *

Norman was a perfectly safe, perfectly sane man. He lived with his wife and son, who were both perfectly safe, perfectly sane, in a world that was perfectly sane, perfectly safe. It had been that way all his life. So when he woke up that morning, he felt as perfect as always. He had no inkling at all of the things that had already started to happen to him.

As usual, he woke up when he heard the signal from the biometer cybernetically attached to his wrist; and, as usual, the first thing he did was to press the stud which activated the biometer's LED readout. The display gleamed greenly for a moment on the small screen. As usual, it said, *You are OK*. There was nothing to be afraid of.

As usual, he had absolutely no idea what he would have done if it had said anything else.

His wife, Sally, was already up. Her signal came before his so that she would have time to use the bathroom and get breakfast started. That way, there would be no unpleasant hurrying. He rolled out of bed promptly and went to take his turn in the bathroom so that he would not be late for work and his son, Enwell, would not be late for school.

Everything in the bathroom was the same as usual. Even though Sally had just used it, the vacuum-sink was spotless. And the toilet was as clean as new. He could not even detect his wife's warmth on the seat. Everything was perfectly safe, perfectly sane. His reflection in the mirror was the only thing that had changed.

The tight lump in the centre of his forehead made no sense to him. He had never seen it before. Automatically, he checked his biomitter, but again it said, *You are OK*. That seemed true enough. He did not feel ill—and he was almost the only person he knew who knew what ‘ill’ meant. The lump did not hurt in any way. But still he felt vaguely uneasy. He trusted the biomitter. It should have been able to tell him what was happening.

Carefully, he explored the lump. It was as hard as bone. In fact, it seemed to be part of his skull. It looked familiar; and he scanned back in his memory through some of the books he had read until he found what he wanted. His lump looked like the base of a horn or perhaps the nub of a new antler. He had seen such things in books.

That made even less sense. His face wore an unusual frown as he finished in the bathroom. He returned to the bedroom to get dressed and then went to the kitchen for breakfast.

Sally was just putting his food on the table—the same juice, cereal, and soyham that she always served him—a perfectly safe meal that would give him energy for the morning without letting him gain weight or become ill. He sat down to eat it as he always did. But when Sally sat down opposite him, he looked at her and said, ‘What’s this thing on my forehead?’

His wife had a round bland face, and its lines had slowly become blurred over the years. She looked at his lump vaguely, but there was no recognition in her eyes. ‘Are you OK?’ she said.

He touched the stud of his biomitter and showed her that he was OK.

Automatically, she checked her own biomitter and got the same answer. Then she looked at him again. This time, she, too, frowned. ‘It shouldn’t be there,’ she said.

Enwell came into the kitchen, and Sally went to get his breakfast. Enwell was a growing boy. He watched the food come as if he were hungry, and then he began to eat quickly. He was eating too quickly. But Norman did not need to say anything. Enwell’s biomitter gave a low hum and displayed in kind yellow letters: *Eat more slowly*. Enwell obeyed with a shrug.

Norman smiled at his son's obedience, then frowned again. He trusted his biomitter. It should be able to explain the lump on his forehead. Using the proper code, he tapped on the face of the display, *I need a doctor ...* A doctor would know what was happening to him.

His biomitter replied, *You are OK.*

This did not surprise him. It was standard procedure—the biomitter was only doing its job by reassuring him. He tapped again, *I need a doctor.* This time, the green letters said promptly, *Excused from work. Go to Medical Building room 218.*

Enwell's biomitter signalled that it was time for him to go to school. 'Got to go,' he mumbled as he left the table. If he saw the lump on his father's forehead, he did not think enough about it to say anything. Soon he had left the house. As usual, he was on time.

Norman rubbed his lump. The hard bone nub made him feel uneasy again. He resisted an urge to recheck his biomitter. When he had finished his breakfast, he said goodbye to Sally, as he always did when he was going to work. Then he went out to the garage and got into his mobile.

After he had strapped himself in, he punched the address of the Medical Building into the console. He knew where the Medical Building was not because he had ever been there before (in fact, no one he knew had ever been there), but because it was within sight of the National Library, where he worked. Once the address was locked in, his mobile left the garage smoothly on its balloon tyres (a perfectly safe design), and slid easily into the perfectly sane flow of the traffic.

All the houses on this street were identical for a long way in either direction, and as usual Norman paid no attention to them. He did not need to watch the traffic, since his mobile took care of things like that. His seat was perfectly comfortable. He just relaxed in his safety straps and tried not to feel concerned about his lump until his mobile deposited him on the kerb outside the Medical Building.

This building was much taller and longer than the National Library; but, apart from that, the two were very much alike. Both were empty except for the people who worked there; and the people worked there because they needed jobs, not because there was any work that needed to be done. And both were similarly laid out inside. Norman had no trouble finding his way to room 218.

Room 218 was in the Iatrogenics Wing. In the outer office was a desk with a computer terminal very much like the one Norman used at the library, and at the desk sat a young woman with yellow hair and confused eyes. When Norman entered her office, she stared at him as if he were sick. Her stare made him touch his lump and frown. But she was not staring at his forehead. After a moment, she said, 'It's been so long—I've forgotten what to do.'

'Maybe I should tell you my name,' he said.

'That sounds right,' she said. She sounded relieved. 'Yes, I think that's right. Tell me your name.'

He told her. She looked around the terminal, then pushed a button to engage some kind of program.

'Now what?' he said.

'I don't know,' she said. She did not seem to like being so confused.

Norman did not know, either. But almost at once the door to the inner office opened. The woman shrugged, so Norman just walked through the doorway.

The inner office had been designed to be cosy, but something had gone wrong with its atmospherics, and now it was deep in dust. When Norman sat down in the only chair, he raised the dust, and the dust made him cough.

'I'm Dr Brett,' a voice said. 'You seem to have a cough.'

The voice came from a console that faced the chair. Apparently, Dr Brett was a computer who looked just like the Director of the National Library.

Norman relaxed automatically. He naturally trusted a computer like that. 'No,' he said. 'It's the dust.'

'Ah, the dust,' the computer said. 'I'll make a note to have it removed.' His voice sounded wise and old and very rusty. After a moment, he went on. 'There must be something wrong with my scanners. You look healthy to me.'

Norman said, 'My biometer says I'm OK.'

'Well, then my scanners must be right. You're in perfect health. Why did you come?'

'I have a lump on my forehead.'

'A lump?' Dr Brett hummed. 'It looks healthy to me. Are you sure it isn't natural?'

'Yes.' For an instant, Norman felt unnaturally irritated. He touched the lump with his fingers. It was as hard as bone—no, harder, as hard as steel, magnacite. It was as hard as tung-diamonds. He began to wonder why he had bothered to come here.

'Of course, of course,' the doctor said. 'I've checked your records. You weren't born with it. What do you think it is?'

The question surprised Norman. 'How should I know? I thought you would tell me.'

'Of course,' said the computer. 'You can trust me. I'll tell you everything that's good for you. That's what I'm here for. You know that. The Director of the National Library speaks very highly of you. It's in your records.'

The machine's voice made Norman's irritation evaporate. He trusted his biometer. He trusted Dr Brett. He settled himself in the chair to hear what his lump was. But even that amount of movement raised the dust. He sneezed twice.

Dr Brett said, 'You seem to have a cold.'

‘No,’ Norman said. ‘It’s the dust.’

‘Ah, the dust,’ Dr Brett said. ‘Thank you for coming.’

“‘Thank you for—’?” Norman was surprised. All at once, he felt very uneasy. He felt that he had to be careful. ‘Aren’t you going to tell me what it is?’

‘There’s nothing to worry about,’ the doctor said. ‘You’re perfectly healthy. It will go away in a couple of days. Thank you for coming.’

The door was open. Norman stared at the computer. The director did not act like this. He was confused. But he did not ask any more questions. Instead, he was careful. He said, ‘Thank you, Doctor,’ and walked out of the office. The door closed behind him.

The woman was still sitting at the outer desk. When she saw Norman, she beckoned to him. ‘Maybe you can help me,’ she said.

‘Yes?’ he said.

‘I remember what I’m supposed to do now,’ she said. ‘After you see the doctor, I’m supposed to get his instructions’—she tapped the console—‘and make sure you understand them. But nobody’s ever come here before. And when I got this job, I didn’t tell them’—she looked away from Norman—‘that I don’t know how to read.’

Norman knew what she meant. Of course, she could read her biometer—everybody could do that. But except for that, reading was not taught any more. Enwell certainly was not learning how to read in school. Reading was not needed any more. Except for the people at the National Library, Norman was the only person he knew who could actually read. That was why no one ever came to use the library.

But now he was being careful. He smiled to reassure the woman and walked round the desk to look at her console. She tapped the display to activate the read-out.

At once, vivid red letters sprang across the screen. They said:

SECRET CONFIDENTIAL PRIVATE PERSONAL SECRET UNDER NO
CIRCUMSTANCES REPEAT UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOW
THIS DIAGNOSIS TO PATIENT OR REVEAL ITS
CONTENTS

Then there was a series of numbers that Norman did not understand. Then the letters said:

ABSOLUTE PRIORITY TRANSMIT AT ONCE TO GENERAL HOSPITAL
EMERGENCY DIVISION REPEAT EMERGENCY DIVISION ABSOLUTE
PRIORITYcycle
cyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle

‘Transmit,’ the woman said. “That means I’m supposed to send this to the hospital.’ Her hand moved towards the buttons that would send the message.

Norman caught her wrist. ‘No,’ he said. ‘That isn’t what it means. It means something else.’

The woman said, ‘Oh.’

The bright red letters said:

DIAGNOSIScyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle PATIENT
SUFFERING FROM MASSIVE GENETIC BREAKDOWN OF
INTERMEDIATE ORIGIN COMPLETE REPEAT COMPLETE
STRUCTURAL TRANSITION IN PROGRESS TRANSMUTATION
IRREVERSIBLEcycle
cyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle
PROGNOSIScyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle PATIENT
WILL BECOME DANGEROUS HIMSELF AND WILL CAUSE FEAR IN
OTHERS REPEAT WILL CAUSE FEAR
TREATMENTcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycl STUDY
RECOMMENDED BUT DESTRUCTION IMPERATIVE REPEAT
IMPERATIVE REPEAT IMPERATIVE EFFECT
SOONESTcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle

‘What did it say!’ the woman said.

For a moment, Norman did not answer. His lump was as hard as a magnacite nail driven into his skull. Then he said, ‘It said I should get some rest. It said I’ve been working too hard. It said I should go to the hospital if I don’t feel better tomorrow.’ Before the woman could stop him, he pressed the buttons that erased the terminal’s memory. The terminal was just like the one he used in the National Library, and he knew what to do. After erasing, he programmed the terminal to cancel everything that had happened today. Then he fed in a cancel program to wipe out everything in the terminal. He did not know what good that would do, but he did it anyway.

He expected the woman to try to stop him, but she did not. She had no idea of what he was doing.

He was sweating, and his pulse was too fast. He was so uneasy that his stomach hurt. That had never happened to him before. He left the office without saying anything to the woman. His knees were trembling. As he walked down the corridor of the Iatrogenics Wing, his biomitter was saying in blue reassuring letters, *You will be OK. You will be OK.*

Apparently, his erasures were successful. In the next few days, nothing happened to him as a result of Dr Brett’s report. By the time he had returned home from the Medical Building, his read-out had regained its placid green, *You are OK.*

He did this deliberately. He did not feel OK. He felt uneasy. But he did not want his biomitter to send him to the General Hospital. So while his mobile drove him home, he made an effort to seem OK. The touch of his lump gave him a strange reassurance, and after a while his pulse, blood-pressure, respiration, reflexes had become as steady as usual.

And at home everything seemed perfectly sane, perfectly safe. He woke up every morning at the signal of his biomitter, went to work at the signal of his biomitter, ate lunch at the signal of his biomitter. This was reassuring. It reassured him that his biomitter took such good care of him. Without it, he might have worked all day without lunch, reading, sorting the mountain of discarded books in the storeroom, feeding them into the reference computer.

At times like that, his uneasiness went away. He went home again at the end of the day at the signal of his biomitter.

But at home his uneasiness returned. Something was happening inside him. Every morning, he saw in the mirror that his lump was growing. It was clearly a horn now—a pointed shaft as white as bone. It was full of strength. When it was more than four inches long, he tested it on the mirror. The mirror was made of glasteel so that it would never shatter and hurt anybody. But he scratched it easily with the tip of his horn. Scratching it took no effort at all.

And that was not the only change. The soles of his feet were growing harder. His feet seemed to be getting shorter. They were starting to look like hooves.

Tufts of pure white hair as clean as the sky were sprouting from the backs of his calves and the back of his neck. Something that might have been a tail grew out of the small of his back.

But these things were not what made him uneasy. And he was not uneasy because he was thinking that someone from the hospital might come to destroy him. He was not thinking that at all. He was being careful: he did not let himself think anything that might make his biomitter call for help. No, he was uneasy because he could not understand what Sally and Enwell were doing about what was happening to him.

They were not doing anything. They were ignoring the changes in him as if he looked just the same as always.

Everything was perfectly sane, perfectly safe, to them.

First this made him uneasy. Then it made him angry. Something important was happening to him, and they did not even see it. Finally at breakfast one morning he became too irritated to be careful. Enwell's biomitter signalled that it was time for him to go to school. He mumbled, 'Got to go,' and left the table. Soon he had left the house. Norman watched his son go. Then he said to Sally, 'Who taught him to do that?'

She did not look up from her soyham. 'Do what?' she said.

‘Go to school,’ he said. ‘Obey his biomitter. We never taught him to do that.’

Sally’s mouth was full. She waited until she swallowed. Then she said, ‘Everybody does it.’

The way she said it made his muscles tighten. A line of sweat ran down his back. For an instant, he wanted to hit the table with his hand—hit it with the hard flat place on the palm of his hand. He felt sure he could break the table.

Then his biomitter signalled to him. Automatically, he left the table. He knew what to do. He always knew what to do when his biomitter signalled. He went out to the garage and got into his mobile. He strapped himself into the seat. He did not notice what he was doing until he saw that his hands had punched in the address of the General Hospital.

At once, he cancelled the address, unstrapped himself and got out of the mobile. His heart was beating too fast. His biomitter was saying without being asked, *Go to the Hospital. You will be OK.* The letters were yellow.

His hands trembled. But he tapped onto the display, *I am OK.* Then he went back into the house.

Sally was cleaning the kitchen, as she always did after breakfast. She did not look at him.

‘Sally,’ he said. ‘I want to talk to you. Something’s happening to me.’

‘It’s time to clean the kitchen,’ she said. ‘I heard the signal.’

‘Clean the kitchen later,’ he said. ‘I want to talk to you. Something’s happening to me.’

‘I heard the signal,’ she said. ‘It’s time to clean the kitchen now.’

‘Look at me,’ he said.

She did not look at him. Her hands were busy wiping scraps of soyham into the vacuum-sink, where they were sucked away.

‘Look at me,’ he said. He took hold of her shoulders with his hands and made her face him. It was easy. He was strong. ‘Look at my forehead.’

She did not look at him. Her face screwed up into tight knots and ridges. It turned red. Then she began to cry. She wailed and wailed, and her legs did not hold her up. When he let her go, she sank to the floor and folded up into a ball and wailed. Her biomitter said to her in blue, *You will be OK. You will be OK.* But she did not see it. She cried as if she were terrified.

Norman felt sick in his stomach. But his carefulness had come back. He left his wife and went back to the garage. He got into his mobile and punched in an address only ten houses away down the road. His mobile left the garage smoothly and eased itself into the perfectly sane flow of the traffic. When it parked at the address he had given it, he did not get out. He sat in his seat and watched his house.

Before long, an ambulance rolled up to his house. Men in white coats went in. They came out carrying Sally in a stretcher. They loaded her carefully into the ambulance and drove away.

Because he did not know what else to do, he punched the address of the National Library into the console of his mobile and went to work. The careful part of him knew that he did not have much time. He knew (everyone knew) that his biomitter was his friend. But now he also knew that it would not be long before his biomitter betrayed him. The rebellion in his genes was becoming too strong. It could not stay secret much longer. And he still did not know what was happening to him. He wanted to use the time to find out, if he could. The library was the best place for him to go.

But when he reached his desk with its computer console like the one in Dr Brett’s outer office, he did not know what to do. He had never done any research before. He did not know anyone who had ever done any research. His job was to sort books, to feed them into the reference computer. He did not even know what he was looking for.

Then he had an idea. He keyed his terminal into the reference computer and programmed it for autoscan. Then he tapped in his question, using the ‘personal information’ code which was supposed to keep his question and

answer from tying up the general circuits of the library and bothering the director. He asked:

*I have hooves, a tail, white hair, and a horn in the middle of my forehead.
What am I?*

After a short pause, the display ran numbers which told Norman his answer was coming from the 1976 *Encyclopedia Americana*. That encyclopedia was a century out of date, but it was the most recent one in the library. Apparently, people had not bothered to make encyclopedias for a long time.

Then the display said:

ANSWERcycleUNICORNcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle
DATAFOLLOWScyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle

His uneasiness became suddenly sharper. There was a sour taste in his mouth as he scanned the read-out.

THE UNICORN IS A MYTHOLOGICAL BEAST USUALLY DEPICTED
AS A LARGE HORSE WITH A SINGLE HORN ON ITS
FOREHEADcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle

Sweat ran into his eyes. He missed a few lines while he blinked to clear his sight.

IT REPRESENTED CHASTITY AND PURITY THOUGH IT WOULD
FIGHT SAVAGELY WHEN CORNERED IT COULD BE TAMED BY A
VIRGIN'S TOUCH IN SOME INTERPRETATIONS THE UNICORN IS
ASSOCIATED WITH THE VIRGIN MARY IN OTHERS IT REPRESENTS
CHRIST THE REDEEMERcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle

Then, to his surprise, the display showed him a picture of a unicorn. It was prancing high on its strong clean legs, and its coat was pure as the stars, and its eyes shone. Its mane flew like the wind. Its long white horn was as strong as the sun. At the sight, all his uneasiness turned into joy. The unicorn was beautiful. It was beautiful. He was going to be beautiful. For a long time, he made the display hold that picture, and he stared at it and stared at it.

But after his joy receded a little and the display went blank, he began to think. He felt that he was thinking for the first time in his life. His thoughts were clear and necessary and quick.

He understood that he was in danger. He was in danger from his biometer. It was a hazard to him. It was only a small thing, a meta-sensor that monitored his body for signs of illness; but it was linked to the huge computers of the General Hospital; and when his metabolism passed beyond the parameters of safety, sanity, his biometer would summon the men in white coats. For the first time in his life, he felt curious about it. He felt that he needed to know more about it.

Without hesitation, he tapped his question into the reference computer, using his personal information code. He asked:

Origin of biometer?

The display ran numbers promptly and began a read-out.

WORLDWIDE VIOLENCE CRIME WAR INSANITY OF 20TH CENTURY
SHOWED HUMANS CAPABLE OF SELF-EXTERMINATION
OPERATIVE CAUSE WAS FEAR REPEAT FEAR RESEARCH
DEMONSTRATED HUMANS WITHOUT FEAR NONVIOLENT
SANEcyclecyclecyclecycle POLICE EDUCATION PEACE TREATIES
INADEQUATE TO CONTROL FEAR OF INDIVIDUAL HUMANS BUT
SANE INDIVIDUAL HUMANS NOT PRONE TO VIOLENCE WAR
TREATIES POLICE WEAPONS UNNECESSARY IF INDIVIDUALS NOT
AFRAIDcyclecyclecyclecycle

TREATMENTcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle
BIOMITTER MEDICOMPUTER NETWORK INITIATED
FORcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycle ALL
INDIVIDUALS MONITOR PHYSIOLOGICAL SIGNS OF EMOTION
STRESS ILLNESS CONDITIONED RESPONSES INBRED TO CONTROL
BEHAVIOUR FEAR***CROSSREFERENCE PAVLOV BEHAVIOUR
MODIFICATION SUBCONSCIOUS HYPNOTISMcyclecy

SUCCESS OF BIOMITTER PROGRAM DEMONSTRATES FEAR DOES
NOT EXIST WHERE CONTROL ORDER

Abruptly, the green letters flashed off the display, and the terminal began to read out a line of red.

DATA CANCEL REPEAT CANCELcyclecyclecyclecyclecyc MATERIAL
CLASSIFICATION RESTRICTED NOT AVAILABLE WITHOUT
APPROVAL DIRECTOR NATIONAL LIBRARY FILE APPROVAL CODE
BEFORE REACTIVATING REFERENCE
PROGRAMcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyc

Norman frowned around his horn. He was not sure what had happened. Perhaps he had accidentally stumbled upon information that was always restricted and had automatically triggered the reference computer's cancellation program. Or perhaps the director had just now succeeded in breaking his personal information code and had found out what he was doing. If the interruption had been automatic, he was still safe. But if the director had been monitoring him personally, he did not have much time. He needed to know.

He left his desk and went to the director's office. The director looked very much like Dr Brett. Norman believed that he could break the director with one kick of his hard foot. He knew what to do. He said, 'Director.'

'Yes, Norman?' the director said. His voice was warm and wise, like Dr Brett's. Norman did not trust him. 'Are you OK? Do you want to go home?'

'I am OK,' Norman said. 'I want to take out some books.'

""Take out some books""? the director said. 'What do you mean?'

'I want to withdraw some books. I want to take them home with me.'

'Very well,' the director said. 'Take them with you. Take the rest of the day off. You need some rest.'

'Thank you,' Norman said. He was being careful. Now he had what he wanted. He knew that the director had been watching him. He knew that the director had deliberately broken his personal information code. He knew that the director had transmitted his information to the General Hospital and had

been told that he, Norman, was dangerous. No one was allowed to take books out of the National Library. It was forbidden to withdraw books. Always. Even the director could not override that rule, unless he had been given emergency programming.

Norman was no longer safe. But he did not hurry. He did not want the General Hospital to think that he was afraid. The men in white coats would chase him more quickly if they thought he was afraid of them. He walked calmly, as if he were perfectly safe, perfectly sane, to the stacks where the books were kept after they had been sorted and fed into the reference computer.

He did not try to be thorough or complete. His time was short. He took only the books he could carry, only the books he was sure he wanted: he took *The Mask, the Unicorn, and the Messiah*; the *Index to Fairy Tales, Myths, and Legends*; *Barbarous Knowledge*; the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*; *The Masks of God*; and *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. He would need these books when his transformation was complete. They would tell him what to do.

He did not try to find any others. He left the National Library, hugging the books to his broad chest like treasure.

The careful part of him expected to have trouble with his mobile, but he did not. It took him home exactly as it always did.

When he entered his house, he found that Sally had not been brought back. Enwell had not come home. He did not think that he would ever see them again. He was alone.

He took off his clothes because he knew that unicorns did not wear clothes. Then he sat down in the living-room and started to read his books.

They did not make sense to him. He knew most of the words, but he could not seem to understand what they were saying. At first he was disappointed in himself. He was afraid that he might not make a very good unicorn. But then he realised the truth. The books did not make sense to him because he was not ready for them. His transformation was not complete yet. When it was

complete, he would be able to understand the books. He bobbed his horn joyfully. Then, because he was careful, he spent the rest of the day memorising as much as he could of the first book, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. He wanted to protect himself in case his books were lost or damaged.

He was still memorising after dark, and he was not tired. His horn filled him with strength. But then he began to hear a humming noise in the air. It was soft and soothing, and he could not tell how long it had been going on. It was coming from his biomitter. It found a place deep inside him that obeyed it. He lay down on the couch and went to sleep.

But it was not the kind of sleep he was used to. It was not calm and safe. Something in him resisted it, resisted the reassuring hum. His dreams were wild. His emotions were strong, and one of them was uneasiness. His uneasiness was so strong that it must have been fear. It made him open his eyes.

All the lights were on in the living-room, and there were four men in white coats around him. Each of them carried a hypogun. All the hypoguns were pointed at him.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ one of the men said. ‘We won’t hurt you. You’re going to be all right. Everything is going to be OK.’

Norman did not believe him. He saw that the men were gripping their hypoguns tightly. He saw that the men were afraid. They were afraid of him.

He flipped off the couch and jumped. His legs were immensely strong. His jump carried him over the heads of the men. As he passed, he kicked one of the men. Blood appeared on his forehead and splattered his coat, and he fell down and did not move.

The nearest man fired his hypogun. But Norman blocked the penetrating spray with the hard flat heel of his palm. His fingers curled into a hoof, and he hit the man in the chest. The man fell down.

The other two men were trying to run away. They were afraid of him. They were running towards the door. Norman jumped after them and poked the nearest one with his horn. The man seemed to fly away from the horn. He crashed into the other man, and they both crashed against the door and fell down and did not move again. One of them had blood all over his back.

Norman's biomitter was blaring red: *You are ill. You are ill.*

The man Norman had punched was still alive. He was gasping for breath. His face was white with death, but he was able to tap a message into his biomitter. Norman could read his fingers. He was saying, *Seal the house. Keep him trapped. Bring nerve gas.*

Norman went to the man. 'Why?' he said. 'Why are you trying to kill me?'

The man looked at Norman. He was too close to dying to be afraid any more. 'You're dangerous,' he said. He was panting, and blood came out of his mouth. 'You're deadly.'

'Why?' Norman said. 'What's happening to me?'

'Transmutation,' the man said. 'Atavism. Psychic throwback. You're becoming something. Something that never existed.'

"'Never existed'?" Norman said.

'You must've been buried,' the man said. 'In the subconscious. All this time. You never existed. People made you up. A long time ago. They believed in you. Because they needed to. Because they were afraid.'

More blood came out of his mouth. 'How could it happen?' he said. His voice was very weak. 'We put fear to sleep. There is no more fear. No more violence. How could it happen?' Then he stopped breathing. But his eyes stayed open, staring at the things he did not understand.

Norman felt a deep sorrow. He did not like killing. A unicorn was not a killing beast. But he had had no choice. He had been cornered.

His biomitter was shouting, *You are ill.*

He did not intend to be cornered again. He raised his wrist and touched his biomitter with the tip of his horn. Pieces of metal were torn away, and the bright blood ran down his arm.

After that, he did not delay. He took a slipcover from the couch and used it as a sack to carry his books. Then he went to the door and tried to leave his house.

The door did not open. It was locked with heavy steel bolts that he had never seen before. They must have been built into the house. Apparently, the men in white coats, or the medicomputers, were prepared for everything.

They were not prepared for a unicorn. He attacked the door with his horn. His horn was as hard as steel, as hard as magnacite. It was as hard as tung-diamonds. The door burst open, and he went out into the night.

Then he saw more ambulances coming down the road. Ambulances were converging on his house from both directions. He did not know where to run. So he galloped across the street and burst in the door of the house opposite his. The house belonged to his friend, Barto. He went to his friend for help.

But when Barto and his wife and his two daughters saw Norman, their faces filled with fear. The daughters began to wail like sirens. Barto and his wife fell to the floor and folded up into balls.

Norman broke down the back door and ran out into the service lane between the rows of houses.

He travelled the lane for miles. After the sorrow at his friend's fear came a great joy at his strength and swiftness. He was stronger than the men in white coats, faster than ambulances. And he had nothing else to be wary of. The medicomputers could not chase him themselves. With his biomitter gone, they could not even tell where he was. And they had no weapons with which to fight him except men in white coats and ambulances. He was free and strong and exhilarated for the first time in his life.

When daylight came, he climbed up onto the roofs of the houses. He felt safe there, and when he was ready to rest, he slept there alone, facing the sky.

He spent days like that—travelling the city, reading his books and committing them to memory—waiting for his transformation to be complete. When he needed food, he raided grocery stores to get it, though the terror of the people he met filled him with sorrow. And gradually his food-need changed. Then he did not go to the grocery stores any more. He pranced in the parks at night and cropped the grass and the flowers and ran nickering among the trees.

And his transformation continued. His mane and tail grew thick and exuberant. His face lengthened, and his teeth became stronger. His feet became hooves, and the horny part of his hands grew. White hair the colour of moonlight spread across his body and limbs, formed flaring tufts at the backs of his ankles and wrists. His horn grew long and clean and perfectly pointed.

His joints changed also and began to flex in new ways. For a time, this gave him some pain, but soon it became natural to him. He was turning into a unicorn. He was becoming beautiful. At times, there did not seem to be enough room in his heart for the joy the change gave him.

Yet he did not leave the city. He did not leave the people who were afraid of him, though their fear gave him pangs of a loneliness he had never felt before. He was waiting for something. There was something in him that was not complete.

At first, he believed that he was simply waiting for the end of his transformation. But gradually he came to understand that his waiting was a kind of search. He was alone—and unicorns were not meant to be alone, not like this. He was searching the city to see if he could find other people like him, people who were changing.

And at last one night he came in sight of the huge, high structure of the General Hospital. He had been brought there by his search. If there were other people like him, they might have been captured by the men in white coats. They might be prisoners in the Emergency Division of the hospital. They might be lying helpless while the medicomputers studied them, plotting their destruction.

His nostrils flared angrily at the thought. He stamped his foreleg. He knew what he had to do. He put his sack of books in a place of safety. Then he lowered his head and charged down the road to attack the General Hospital.

He broke down the front doors with his horn and pounded into the corridors. People fled from him in terror. Men and women grabbed hypoguns and tried to fire at him, but he flicked them with the power of his horn, and they fell down. He rampaged on in search of the Emergency Division.

The General Hospital was designed just like the Medical Building and the National Library. He was able to find his way without trouble. Soon he was among the many rooms of the Emergency Division. He kicked open the doors, checked the rooms, checked room after room. They were full of patients. The Emergency Division was a busy place. He had not expected to find that so many people were ill and dangerous. But none of them were what he was looking for. They were not being transformed. They were dying from physical or mental sickness. If any people like him had been brought here, they had already been destroyed.

Red rage filled his heart. He charged on through the halls.

Then suddenly he came to the great room where the medicomputers lived. Rank on rank, they stood before him. Their displays glared evilly at him, and their voices shouted. He heard several of them shout together, 'Absolute emergency! Atmospheric control, activate all nerve gas! Saturation gassing, all floors!'

They were trying to kill him. They were going to kill everybody in the hospital.

The medicomputers were made of magnacite and plasmium. Their circuits were fireproof. But they were not proof against the power of his horn. When he attacked them, they began to burn in white fire, as incandescent as the sun.

He could hear gas hissing into the air. He took a deep breath and ran.

The gas was hissing into all the corridors of the hospital. Patients began to die. Men and women in white coats began to die. Norman began to think that

he would not be able to get out of the hospital before he had to breathe.

A moment later, the fire in the medicomputers ignited the gas. The gas burned. Oxygen tanks began to explode. Dispensaries went up in flames. The fire extinguishers could not stop the intense heat of burning magnacite and plasmium. When the cylinders of nerve gas burst, they had enough force to shatter the floors and walls.

Norman flashed through the doors and galloped into the road with the General Hospital raging behind him like a furnace.

He breathed the night air deep into his chest and skittered to a stop on the far side of the road to shake the sparks out of his mane. Then he turned to watch the hospital burn.

At first he was alone in the road. The people who lived nearby did not come to watch the blaze. They were afraid of it. They did not try to help the people who escaped the flames.

But then he saw a young girl come out from between the houses. She went into the road to look at the fire.

Norman pranced over to her. He reared in front of her.

She did not run away.

She had a lump on her forehead like the base of a horn or the nub of a new antler. There was a smile on her lips, as if she were looking at something beautiful.

And there was no fear in her eyes at all.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

F. Anstey

The quest to slay dragons has been one of the most enduring themes in heroic fantasy and it seems only right that it should be represented here by an author whose name sounds almost like an anagram of the word 'fantasy'. F. Anstey has been described by the eminent American critic, Everett F. Bleiler, in his Guide to Supernatural Fiction (1983), as 'the pre-eminent 19th century writer of humorous fantasy' and his influence has been far-reaching. His comic masterpiece, Vice-Versa (1882), about a father and son who exchange bodies, and The Tinted Venus (1885), in which the statue of an ancient Greek goddess comes to life, have been reworked by writers such as John Collier and Thorne Smith, as well as being adapted for films and television; while the themes of some of his short stories like 'The Adventure of the Snowing Globe' and 'A Bohemian Bag'—both published in 1906—have been the precursors of several recent literary works. Robert Bloch's contribution to this book (p. 153) is an example of the first, while Anstey's travelling bag with a mind of its own lives again in the ingenuity and cussedness of Terry Pratchett's Luggage! The name F. Anstey was actually the pseudonym of Thomas Anstey Guthrie (1856— 1934) and came about as a result of a printer's error. The poor man misread the signature 'T. Anstey', but with typical good humour the author passed off the mistake and instead decided to use the name on all his later work. Trained originally to be a barrister, Anstey enjoyed such success with his first novel, Vice-Versa, that he gave up the bar and concentrated on writing tales of fantasy, many of which appeared in Punch and the other leading magazines of the Victorian era. When in 1915 he unexpectedly abandoned all fiction writing to translate Moliere's plays for the London stage, his reputation suffered something of a decline and it was not until the film and television industries brought his work to the screen that his contribution to humorous fantasy was fully acknowledged.

'The Adventure of the Snowing Globe' is Anstey at his best, recounting the story of a cowardly solicitor (shades of a former colleague?) who

unexpectedly enters the world of a snowing globe and there finds himself cast in the role of dragon-slayer. . .

* * * *

Before beginning to relate an experience which, I am fully aware, will seem to many so singular as to be almost, if not quite, incredible, it is perhaps as well to state that I am a solicitor of several years' standing, and that I do not regard myself—nor, to the best of my knowledge and belief, have I ever been regarded—as a person in whom the imaginative faculty is at all unduly prominent.

It was in Christmas week of last year. I was walking home from my office in New Square, Lincoln's Inn, as my habit is—except on occasions when the state of the weather renders such open-air exercise too imprudent—and on my way I went into a toy-shop, with a view to purchasing some seasonable present for a small godchild of mine.

As was only to be expected at that time of year, the shop was crowded with customers, and I had to wait until one of the assistants should be at liberty. While waiting, my attention was attracted to a toy on the counter before me.

It was a glass globe, about the size of a moderately large orange. Inside it was a representation of what appeared to be the facade of a castle, before which stood a figure holding by a thread a small pear-shaped airball striped red and blue. The globe was full of water containing a white sediment in solution, which, when agitated, produced the effect of a miniature snowstorm.

I cannot account for such a childish proceeding, except by the circumstance that I had nothing better to occupy me at the moment, but I employed myself in shaking the globe and watching the tiny snowflakes circulating in the fluid, till I became so engrossed as to be altogether oblivious of my surroundings. So that I was not particularly surprised when I found, as I presently did, that the flakes were falling and melting on my coat-sleeve. Before me was a heavy gateway belonging to a grim, castellated edifice, which I thought at first must be Holloway Gaol, though how I could have wandered so far out of my way was more than I could understand.

But on looking round I saw no signs of any suburban residences, and recognised that I had somehow strayed into a locality with which I was totally unacquainted, but which was evidently considerably beyond the Metropolitan radius. It seemed to me that my best plan would be to knock at the gate and ask the lodge-keeper where I was and my way to the nearest railway-station; but before I could carry out my intention a wicket in one of the gates was cautiously opened by a person of ancient and venerable appearance. He did not look like an ordinary porter, but was in a peculiar livery, which I took to be a seneschal's—not that I have ever seen a seneschal, but that was my impression of him. Whoever he was, he appeared distinctly pleased to see me. 'You are right welcome, fair sir!' he said, in a high, cracked voice. 'Well knew I that my hapless lady would not lack a protector in her sad plight, though she had well-nigh abandoned all hope of your coming!'

I explained that I had not called by appointment, but was simply a stranger who found himself in the neighbourhood by the merest chance.

'Tis no matter,' he replied, in his old-fashioned diction, 'seeing that you have come, for truly, sir, she is in sore need of anyone who is ready to undertake her cause!'

I said that I happened to be a member of the legal profession, and that if, as I gathered, his mistress was in any difficulty in which she desired my assistance, I was quite prepared to advise her to the best of my ability, and to act for her, should her case be one which, in my opinion, required it.

'That does it, indeed!' he said; 'but I pray you stand no longer parleying without, which, since I perceive you are but ill-protected at present,' he added fussily, 'may be fraught with unnecessary danger. Come within without further delay!'

I did not think there was any real risk of catching cold, but I did wonder why it had not occurred to me to put up my umbrella, until I discovered that my right hand was already engaged in holding a cord to which was attached a gaudily-coloured balloon that floated above my head.

This was so unsuitable an appendage to any solicitor, especially to one about to offer his services in an affair which was apparently serious, that I was somewhat disconcerted for the moment. But I soon recollected having gone into a toy-shop some time previously, and concluded that I must have purchased this air-ball as a present for my godchild.

I was about to explain this to the old man, when he pulled me suddenly through the wicket-gate, shutting the door so sharply that it snapped the string of the balloon. I saw it soaring up on the other side of the wall till a whirl of snow hid it from my sight.

‘Trouble not for its loss,’ said the seneschal; ‘it has fulfilled its purpose in bringing you to our gates.’

If he really supposed that anybody was at all likely to adopt so eccentric a means of conveyance, he must, I thought, be in his dotage, and I began to have a misgiving that, by accepting his invitation to step in, I might have placed myself in a false position.

However, I had gone too far to retract now, so I allowed him to conduct me to his mistress. He took me across a vast courtyard to a side entrance, and then up a winding stair, along deserted corridors, and through empty antechambers, until we came into a great hall, poorly lighted from above, and hung with dim tapestries. There he left me, saying that he would inform his mistress of my arrival.

I had not long to wait before she entered by an opposite archway.

I regret my inability—owing partly to the indifferent manner in which the apartment was lit—to describe her with anything like precision. She was quite young—not much, I should be inclined to say, over eighteen; she was richly but fantastically dressed in some shimmering kind of robe, and her long hair was let down and flowing loose about her shoulders, which (although I am bound to say that the effect, in her case, was not unbecoming) always has, to my mind at least, a certain air of untidiness in a grown-up person, and almost made me doubt for a moment whether she was quite in her right senses.

But, while she was evidently in a highly emotional state, I could detect nothing in her manner of speech that indicated any actual mental aberration. Her personal appearance, too, was distinctly pleasing, and altogether I cannot remember ever to have felt so interested at first sight in any female client.

‘Tell me,’ she cried, ‘is it really true? Have you indeed come to my deliverance?’

‘My dear young lady,’ I said, perceiving that any apology for what I had feared must seem a highly irregular intrusion was unnecessary, ‘I have been given to understand that you have some occasion for my services, and if that is correct I can only say that they are entirely at your disposal. Just try to compose yourself and tell me, as clearly and concisely as you can, the material facts of your case.’

‘Alas! sir,’ she said, wringing her hands, which I remember noticing were of quite remarkable beauty, ‘I am the unhappiest Princess in the whole world.’

I trust I am as free from snobbishness as most people, but I admit to feeling some gratification in the fact that I was honoured by the confidence of a lady of so exalted a rank.

‘I am extremely sorry to hear it, ma’am,’ I said, recollecting that that was the proper way to address a Princess. ‘But I am afraid,’ I added, as I prepared to take her instructions, ‘that I can be but of little assistance to you unless you can bring yourself to furnish me with somewhat fuller particulars.’

‘Surely,’ she said, ‘you cannot be ignorant that I am in the power of a wicked and tyrannous uncle?’

I might have explained that I was far too busy a man to have leisure to keep up with the latest Court scandals, but I refrained.

‘I may take it, then,’ I said, ‘that you are an orphan, and that the relative you refer to is your sole guardian?’

She implied by a gesture that both these inferences were correct. 'He has shut me up a close prisoner in this gloomy place,' she declared, 'and deprived me of all my attendants one by one, save the aged but faithful retainer whom you have beheld.'

I replied, of course, that this was an unwarrantable abuse of his authority, and inquired whether she could assign any motive for such a proceeding on his part.

'He is determined that I shall marry his son,' she explained, 'whom I detest with an unutterable loathing!'

'Possibly,' I ventured to hint, 'there is someone else who—'

'There is none,' she said, 'since I have never been permitted to look upon any other suitor, and here I am held in durance until I consent to this hated union—and I will die sooner! But you will save me from so terrible a fate! For what else are you here?'

'I should be incompetent indeed, ma'am,' I assured her, 'if I could not see a way out of what is really a very ordinary predicament. By attempting to force you into a marriage against your will your guardian has obviously shown himself a totally unfit person to have you in his custody. You have the law entirely on your side.'

'Unfit is he, truly!' she agreed. 'But I care not who else is on my side, so long as you will be my champion. Only, how will you achieve my rescue?'

'Under all the circumstances,' I told her, 'I think our best course would be to apply for a *habeas corpus*. You will then be brought up to the Courts of Justice, and the judge could make any order he thought advisable. In all probability he would remove your uncle from his position and have you made a ward of court.'

There is always a difficulty in getting ladies to understand even the simplest details of legal procedure, and my Princess was no exception to the rule. She did not seem in the least to realise the power which every court possesses of enforcing its own decrees.

‘Sir, you forget,’ she said, ‘that my uncle, who has great renown in these parts as a sorcerer and magician, will assuredly laugh any such order to scorn.’

‘In that case, ma’am,’ said I, ‘he will render himself liable for contempt of court. Besides, should his local reputation answer your description, we have *another* hold on him. If we can only prove that he has been using any subtle craft, means, or device to impose on any of his Majesty’s subjects, he could be prosecuted under the Vagrancy Act of 1824 as a rogue and a vagabond. He might get as much as six months for it!’

‘Ah, sir,’ she cried—rather peevishly, I thought—‘we do but waste precious time in idle talk such as this, of which I comprehend scarce a word! And the hour is nigh when I must meet my uncle face to face, and should I still refuse to obey his will, his wrath will be dire indeed!’

‘All you have to do is to refer him to *me*,’ I said. ‘I think I shall be able, in the course of a personal interview, to bring him to take a more reasonable view of his position. If you are expecting him shortly, perhaps I had better remain here till he arrives?’

‘Happily for us both,’ she replied, ‘he is still many leagues distant from here! Can you not see that, if my rescue is to be accomplished at all, it must be ere his return, or else am I all undone? Is it possible that, after coming thus far, you can tarry here doing naught?’

I took a little time for reflection before answering. ‘After careful consideration,’ I said at last, ‘I have come to the conclusion that, as you are evidently under grave apprehension of some personal violence from your uncle in the event of his finding you on the premises, I should be fully justified in dispensing with the usual formalities and removing you from his custody at once. At all events, I will take that responsibility on myself—whatever risk I may incur.’

‘I crave your pardon for my seeming petulance,’ she said, with a pretty humility. ‘I should have known right well that I might safely rely on the protection of so gallant and fearless a knight!’

‘You will understand, I am sure, ma’am,’ I said, ‘that I cannot, as a bachelor, offer you shelter under my own roof. What I propose (subject, of course, to your approval) is that I should place you under the care of an old aunt of mine at Croydon until some other arrangement can be made. I presume it will not take you long to make your preparations for the journey?’

‘What need of preparation?’ she cried. ‘Let us delay no longer, but fly this instant!’

‘I should recommend you to take at least a dressing-bag,’ I said; ‘you will have time to pack all you may require while your retainer is fetching us a fly. Then I know of nothing to hinder us from leaving at once.’

‘Nothing?’ she exclaimed. ‘Do you dread a dragon so little, then, that you can speak thus lightly?’

I could not help smiling; it was so surprising to find a Princess of her age who still retained a belief in fairy-tales. ‘I think, ma’am,’ I said, ‘that at this time of day a dragon is not an obstacle which we need take into serious consideration. You have evidently not been informed that such a monster has long since ceased to exist. In other words, it is undoubtedly extinct.’

‘And you have slain it!’ she cried, and her eyes blazed with admiration. ‘I might have guessed as much! It is slain—and now even my uncle has no longer power to detain me here! For many a long month I have not dared to look from out my casements, but now I may behold the light of day once more without shrinking!’ She drew back some hangings as she spoke, disclosing a large oriel window, and the next moment she cowered away with a cry of abject terror.

‘Why have you deceived me?’ she demanded, with indignant reproach. ‘It is *not* extinct. It is still there. Look for yourself!’

I did look; the window commanded the rear of the castle, which I had not hitherto seen, and now I saw something else so utterly unexpected that I could hardly trust the evidence of my own eyesight.

Towering above the battlemented outer wall I saw a huge horny head, poised upon a long and flexible neck, and oscillating slowly from side to side with a sinister vigilance. Although the rest of the brute was hidden by the wall, I saw quite enough to convince me that it could not well be anything else than a dragon—and a formidable one at that. I thought I understood now why the seneschal had been so anxious to get me inside, though I wished he had been rather more explicit.

I stood there staring at it—but I made no remark. To tell the truth, I did not feel equal to one just then.

The Princess spoke first. ‘You seem astonished, sir,’ she said, ‘yet you can hardly have been in ignorance that my uncle has set this ferocious monster to guard these walls, and devour me should I strive to make my escape.’

‘I can only say, ma’am,’ I replied, ‘that this is the first intimation I have had of the fact.’

‘Still, you are wise and strong,’ she said. ‘You will surely devise some means whereby to rid me of this baleful thing!’

‘If you will permit me to draw the curtain again,’ I said, ‘I will endeavour to think of something ... Am I right in assuming that the brute is the property of your uncle?’

She replied that that was so.

‘Then I think I see a way,’ I said. ‘Your uncle could be summoned for allowing such a dangerous animal to be at large, since it is clearly not under proper control. And if an application were made to a magistrate, under the Act of 1871, he might be ordered to destroy it at once.’

‘You little know my uncle,’ she said, with a touch of scorn, ‘if you deem that he would destroy his sole remaining dragon at the bidding of any person whatever!’

‘He will incur a penalty of twenty shillings a day till he *does*,’ I replied. ‘In any case, I can promise you that, if I can only manage to get out of this place,

you shall not be exposed to this annoyance very much longer.'

'You will?' she cried. 'Are you quite sure that you will succeed?'

'Practically I am,' I said. 'I shall apply—always supposing I can get home safely—the first thing tomorrow morning, and, if I can only convince the Bench that the terms of the Act are wide enough to include not only dogs, but any other unmanageable quadrupeds, why, the thing is as good as done!'

'Tomorrow! tomorrow!' she repeated impatiently. 'Must I tell you once more that this is no time to delay? Indeed, sir, if I am to be rescued at all, your hand alone can deliver me from this loathly worm!'

I confess I considered she was taking an altogether extravagant view of the relations between solicitor and client.

'If,' I said, 'it could be described with any accuracy as a worm, I should not feel the slightest hesitation about attacking it.'

'Then you will?' she said, entirely missing my point, as usual. 'Tell me you will—for *my* sake!'

She looked so engaging whilst making this appeal that I really had not the heart to pain her by a direct refusal.

'There is nothing,' I said, 'that is, nothing in reason, that I would not do cheerfully for your sake. But if you will only reflect, you will see at once that, in a tall hat and overcoat, and with absolutely no weapon but an umbrella, I should not stand the ghost of a chance against a dragon. I should be too hopelessly overmatched.'

'You say truth,' she replied, much to my satisfaction. 'I could not desire any champion of mine to engage in so unequal a contest. So have no uneasiness on that score.'

On this she clapped her hands as a summons to the seneschal, who appeared so promptly that I fancy he could not have been very far from the keyhole. 'This gallant gentleman,' she explained to him, 'has undertaken to go forth

and encounter the dragon without our walls, provided that he is fitly furnished for so deadly a fray.'

I tried to protest that she had placed a construction on my remarks which they were not intended to bear—but the old man was so voluble in thanks and blessings that I could not get in a single word.

'You will conduct him to the armoury,' the Princess continued, 'and see him arrayed in harness meet for so knightly an endeavour. Sir,' she added to me, 'words fail me at such an hour as this. I cannot even thank you as I would. But I know you will do your utmost on my behalf. Should you fall—'

She broke off here, being evidently unable to complete her sentence, but that was unnecessary. I knew what would happen if I fell.

'But fall you will not,' she resumed. 'Something tells me that you will return to me victorious; and then—and then—should you demand any guerdon of me—yea' (and here she blushed divinely) 'even to this hand of mine, it shall not be denied you.'

Never in the whole course of my professional career had I been placed in a position of greater difficulty. My common sense told me that it was perfectly preposterous on her part to expect such services as these from one who was merely acting as her legal adviser. Even if I performed them successfully—which was, to say the least of it, doubtful—my practice would probably be injuriously affected should my connection with such an affair become known. As for the special fee she had so generously suggested, that, of course, was out of the question. At my time of life marriage with a flighty young woman of eighteen—and a Princess into the bargain—would be rather too hazardous an experiment.

And yet, whether it is that, middle-aged bachelor as I am, I have still a strain of unsuspected romance and chivalry in my nature, or for some other cause that I cannot explain, somehow I found myself kissing the little hand she extended to me, and going forth without another word to make as good a fight of it as I could for her against such an infernal beast as a dragon. I cannot say that I felt cheerful over it, but, anyhow, I went.

I followed the seneschal, who led me down by a different staircase from that I had come up, and through an enormous vaulted kitchen, untenanted by all but black-beetles, which were swarming. Merely for the sake of conversation, I made some remark on their numbers and pertinacity, and inquired why no steps had apparently been taken to abate so obvious a nuisance. ‘Alas! noble sir,’ he replied, as he sadly shook his old white head, ‘‘twas the scullions’ office to clear the place of these pests, and the last minion has long since vanished from our halls!’

I felt inclined to ask him where they had vanished to—but I did not. I thought the answer might prove discouraging. Even as it was, I would have given something for a whisky-and-soda just then—but he did not offer it, and I did not like to suggest it for fear of being misunderstood. And presently we entered the armoury.

Only a limited number of suits were hanging on the walls, and all of them were in a deplorably rusty and decayed condition, but the seneschal took them down one by one, and made fumbling attempts to buckle and hook me into them. Most unfortunately, not a single suit proved what I should call workmanlike, for I defy any man to fight a dragon in armour which is too tight even to move about in with any approach to comfort.

‘I’m afraid it’s no use,’ I told the seneschal, as I reluctantly resumed my ordinary garments. ‘You can see for yourself that there’s nothing here that comes near my size!’

‘But you cannot engage in combat with the dragon in your present habiliments!’ he remonstrated. ‘That were stark madness!’

I was glad that the old man had sufficient sense to see *that*. ‘I am quite of your opinion,’ I replied; ‘and believe me, my good old friend, nothing is farther from my thoughts. My idea is that if—I do not ask you to expose yourself to any unnecessary risk—but if you *could* contrive to divert the dragon’s attention by a demonstration of some sort on one side of the castle, I might manage to slip quietly out of some door on the other.’

‘Are you but a caitiff, then, after all,’ he exclaimed, ‘that you can abandon so lovely a lady to a certain doom?’

‘There is no occasion for addressing me in offensive terms,’ I replied. ‘I have no intention whatever of abandoning your mistress. You will be good enough to inform her that I shall return tomorrow without fail with a weapon that will settle this dragon’s business more effectually than any of your obsolete lances and battle-axes!’

For I had already decided on this as the only course that was now open to me. I had a friend who spent most of the year abroad in the pursuit of big game, but who chanced by good luck to be in town just then. He would, I knew, willingly lend me an express rifle and some expansive bullets, and, as an ex-volunteer and marksman, I felt that the odds would then be slightly in my favour, even if I could not, as I hoped I could, persuade my friend to join me in the expedition.

But the seneschal took a less sanguine view of my prospects.

‘You forget, sir,’ he remarked lugubriously, ‘that, in order to return hither, you must first quit the shelter of these walls—which, all unarmed as you are, would be but to court instant death!’

‘I don’t quite see that,’ I argued. ‘After all, as the dragon made no effort to prevent me from coming in, it is at least possible that it may not object to my going out.’

‘For aught I can say,’ he replied, ‘it may have no orders to hinder any from entrance. As to that I know naught. But of this I am very sure—it suffers no one to depart hence undevoured.’

‘But could I not contrive to get out of its reach before it was aware that I had even started?’ I suggested.

‘I fear me, sir,’ he said despondently, ‘that the creature would not fail to follow up your tracks ere the snow could cover them.’

‘That had not occurred to me,’ I said. ‘But now you mention it, it does not seem altogether unlikely. In your opinion, then, I should do better in remaining where I am?’

‘Only until the enchanter return,’ was his reply, ‘as, if I mistake not, he may do at any moment, after which your stay here will assuredly be but brief.’

‘You can’t mean,’ I said, ‘that he would have the inhumanity to turn me out to be devoured by this beastly dragon? For that is what it would *come* to.’

‘Unless, perchance, by dint of strength or cunning you were to overcome the monster,’ he said. ‘And methought you had come hither with that very intent.’

‘My good man,’ I replied, ‘I’ve no idea why or how I came here, but it was certainly with no desire or expectation of meeting a dragon. However, I begin to see very clearly that if I can’t find some way of putting an end to the brute—and promptly, too—he will make an end of *me*. The question is, how the deuce am I to set about it?’

And then, all at once, I had an inspiration. I recollected the black-beetles, and something the seneschal had said about its being the scullions’ duty to keep them down. I asked him what methods they had employed for this purpose, but, such humble details being naturally outside his province, he was unable to inform me. So I returned to the kitchen, where I began a careful search, not without some hope of success.

For a while I searched in vain, but at last, just when I had begun to despair, I found on a dusty shelf in the buttery the identical thing I had been looking for. It was an earthen vessel containing a paste, which, in spite of the fungoid growth that had collected on its surface, I instantly recognised as a composition warranted to prove fatal to every description of vermin.

I called to the seneschal and asked if he could oblige me with a loaf of white bread, which he brought in evident bewilderment. I cut a slice from the middle and was proceeding to spread the paste thickly upon it when he grasped my arm. ‘Hold!’ he cried. ‘Would you rashly seek your death ere it is due?’

‘You need not be alarmed,’ I told him; ‘this is not for myself. And now will you kindly show me a way out to some part of the roof where I can have access to the dragon?’

Trembling from head to foot he indicated a turret-stair, up which, however, he did not offer to accompany me; it brought me out on the leads of what appeared to be a kind of bastion. I crept cautiously to the parapet and peeped over it, and then for the first time I had a full view of the brute, which was crouching immediately below me. I know how prone the most accurate are to exaggeration in matters of this kind, but, after making every allowance for my excited condition at the time, I do not think I am far out in estimating that the dimensions of the beast could not have been much, if at all, less than those of the 'Diplodocus Carnegii', a model of which is exhibited at the Natural History Museum, while its appearance was infinitely more terrific.

I do not mind admitting frankly that the sight so unmanned me for the moment that I was seized with an almost irresistible impulse to retire by the way I had come before the creature had observed me. And yet it was not without a certain beauty of its own; I should say, indeed, that it was rather an unusually handsome specimen of its class, and I was especially struck by the magnificent colouring of its scales, which surpassed that of even the largest pythons. Still, to an unaccustomed eye there must always be something about a dragon that inspires more horror than admiration, and I was in no mood just then to enjoy the spectacle. It was hunched up together, with its head laid back, like a fowl's, between its wings, and seemed to be enjoying a short nap. I suppose I must unconsciously have given some sign of my presence, for suddenly I saw the horny films roll back like shutters from its lidless eyes, which it fixed on me with a cold glare of curiosity.

And then it shambled on to its feet, and slowly elongated its neck till it brought its horrible head on a level with the battlements. I need not say that on this I promptly retreated to a spot where I judged I should be out of immediate danger. But I had sufficient presence of mind to remember the purpose for which I was there, and, fixing the prepared slice on the ferrule of my umbrella, I extended it as far as my arm would reach in the creature's direction.

I fancy it had not been fed very lately. The head made a lightning dart across the parapet, and a voracious snap—and the next moment both bread and umbrella had disappeared down its great red gullet.

The head was then withdrawn. I could hear a hideous champing sound, as of the ribs of the umbrella being slowly crunched. After that came silence.

Again I crawled to the parapet and looked down. The huge brute was licking its plated jaws with apparent gusto, as though—which was likely enough—an umbrella came as an unaccustomed snack to its jaded palate. It was peacefully engaged now in digesting this *hors d'oeuvre*.

But my heart only sank the lower at the sight. For if an alpaca umbrella with an ebony handle could be so easily assimilated, what possible chance was there that beetle-paste would produce any deleterious effect? I had been a fool to place the faintest hope on so desperate a hazard. Presently he would be coming for more—and I had nothing for him!

But by-and-by, as I gazed in a sort of fascinated repulsion, I fancied I detected some slight symptoms of uneasiness in the reptile's demeanour.

It was almost nothing at first—a restless twitch at times, and a squint in its stony eyes that I had not previously noticed—but it gave me a gleam of hope. Presently I saw the great crest along its spine slowly begin to erect itself, and the filaments that fringed its jaws bristling, as it proceeded to deal a succession of vicious pecks at its distended olive-green paunch, which it evidently regarded as responsible for the disturbance.

Little as I knew about dragons, a child could have seen that this one was feeling somewhat seriously indisposed. Only—was it due to the umbrella or the vermin-killer? As to that I could only attempt to speculate, and my fate—and the Princess's, too—hung upon which was the correct diagnosis!

However, I was not kept long in suspense. Suddenly the beast uttered a kind of bellowing roar—the most appalling sound I think I ever heard—and after that I scarcely know what happened exactly.

I fancy it had some kind of fit. It writhed and rolled over and over, thrashing the air with its big leathery wings, and tangling itself up to a degree that, unless I had seen it, I should have thought impossible, even for a dragon.

After this had gone on for some time, it untied itself and seemed calmer again, till all at once it curved into an immense arch, and remained perfectly rigid with wings outspread for nearly half a minute. Then it suddenly collapsed on its side, panting, snorting, and quivering like some monstrous automobile, after which it stretched itself out to its full length once or twice, and then lay stiff and still. Its gorgeous hues gradually faded into a dull, leaden-grey tint... All was over—the vermin-destroyer had done its work after all.

I cannot say that I was much elated. I am not sure that I did not even feel a pang of self-reproach. I had slain the dragon, it was true, but by a method which I could not think would have commended itself to St George as entirely sportsmanlike, even though the circumstances left me no other alternative.

However, I had saved the Princess, which, after all, was the main point, and there was no actual necessity for her to know more than the bare fact that the dragon was dead.

I was just about to go down and inform her that she was now free to leave the castle, when I heard a whirring noise in the air, and, glancing back, I saw, flying towards me through the still falling snow, an elderly gentleman of forbidding aspect, who was evidently in a highly exasperated state. It was the Princess's uncle.

I don't know how it was, but till that moment I had never realised the extremely unprofessional proceeding into which I had been betrayed by my own impulsiveness. But I saw now, though too late, that, in taking the law into my own hands and administering a poisonous drug to an animal which, however furious it might be, was still the property of another, I had been guilty of conduct unworthy of any respectable solicitor. It was undoubtedly an actionable tort, if not a trespass—while he might even treat it as a criminal offence.

So, as the magician landed on the roof, his face distorted with fury, I felt that nothing would meet the case but the most ample apology. But, feeling that it was better to allow the first remark to come from him, I merely raised my hat and waited to hear what he had to say...

“Are you being attended to, sir?” was the remark that actually came—and both words and tone were so different from what I had expected that I could not repress a start.

And then, to my utter astonishment, I discovered that battlements and magician had all disappeared. I was back again in the toy-shop, staring into the glass globe, in which the snow was still languidly circling.

‘Like to take one of these shilling snowstorms, sir?’ continued the assistant, who seemed to be addressing me; ‘we’re selling a great quantity of them just now. Very suitable and acceptable present for a child, sir, and only a shilling in that size, though we have them larger in stock.’

I bought the globe I had first taken up—but I have not given it to my godchild. I preferred to keep it myself.

Of course, my adventure may have been merely a kind of daydream; though, if so, it is rather odd that it should have taken that form, when, even at night, my dreams—on the rare occasions when I *do* dream—never turn upon such subjects as castles, princesses, or dragons.

A scientific friend, to whom I related the experience, pronounces it to be an ordinary case of auto-hypnotism, induced by staring into a crystal globe for a prolonged period.

But I don’t know. I cannot help thinking that there is something more in it than that.

I still gaze into the globe at times, when I am alone of an evening; but while I have occasionally found myself back in the snowstorm again, I have never, so far, succeeded in getting into the castle.

Perhaps it is as well; for, although I should not at all object to see something more of the Princess, she has most probably, thanks to my instrumentality, long since left the premises—and I cannot say that I have any particular desire to meet the magician.

AFFAIRS IN POICTESME

James Branch Cabell

The earliest series of comic heroic fantasies were the satirical 'Poictesme' books by the American writer James Branch Cabell, which began with The Eagle's Shadow (1904) and continued at the rate of one title a year for almost twenty years, concluding with The Lineage of Lichfield in 1922. Known by the generic title of 'The Biography of the Life of Manuel', the stories are all set in a medieval world—which the author based loosely on thirteenth-century Provence—and followed the supernatural adventures of Manuel the Redeemer, a giant young swineherd who sets out on a quest to advance himself and is aided, first, by a great magician, Miramor Lluagor, and then by Niafer, a young woman he meets dressed in boy's clothing. According to Cabell, Manuel is either a great national hero destined to save his nation or—and I quote— 'a sleazy rogue who reels blunderingly from mystery to mystery, with pathetic makeshifts, not understanding anything, greedy in all desires, and always honeycombed with poltroonery'.

Notwithstanding such conflicts of opinion, Manuel began to build up a following among readers while at the same time puzzling and occasionally outraging certain American literary critics: all of which marked Cabell out as a highly individual writer of heroic fantasy who has, in his turn, influenced later writers including James Blish (who for a time edited the Cabell Society journal) and Philip Jose Farmer in his tetralogy, The Maker of Universes (1965-1970).

James Branch Cabell (1879—1958) was born in Richmond, Virginia, where he lived for much of his life, working during his early years as a local newspaperman. He developed a particular interest in genealogical charts which became the inspiration for his first sardonic fantasies written in the early 1900s. From his research Cabell also evolved the make-believe world of Poictesme, although the series did not really take off until the appearance in 1919 of the controversial bawdy volume, Jurgen. In this, the exploits of a pagan sex goddess named Anaitis in a town called Cockaigne so enraged the authorities that Cabell was prosecuted for obscenity and

the book was banned in Boston. At once Jurgen and Cabell became a cause celebre—with supporters like H. L. Mencken declaring the volume to be a ‘work of genius’—which made the author famous overnight and turned his Poictesme series into best-sellers. Today the erotic elements in Jurgen seem tame, consisting mainly of double entendres that are certainly amusing but never offensive.

What Everett F. Bleiler has called ‘a foundation work of satirical fantasy’ was Figures of Earth, published in 1921. Here is a self-contained episode from it, which I believe captures the flavour of what is undeniably another of the landmarks in comic fantasy.

* * * *

They of Poictesme narrate how Manuel and Niafer travelled east a little way and then turned toward the warm South; and how they found a priest to marry them, and how Manuel confiscated two horses. They tell also how Manuel victoriously encountered a rather terrible dragon at La Flèche, and near Orthez had trouble with a Groach, whom he conquered and imprisoned in a leather bottle, but they say that otherwise the journey was uneventful.

‘And now that every obligation is lifted, and we are reunited, my dear Niafer,’ says Manuel, as they sat resting after his fight with the dragon, ‘we will, I repeat, be travelling everywhere, so that we may see the ends of this world and may judge them.’

‘Dearest,’ replied Niafer, ‘I have been thinking about that, and I am sure it would be delightful, if only people were not so perfectly horrid.’

‘What do you mean, dear snip?’

‘You see, Manuel, now that you have fetched me back from paradise, people will be saying you ought to give me, in exchange for the abodes of bliss from which I have been summoned, at least a fairly comfortable and permanent terrestrial residence. Yes, dearest, you know what people are, and the evil-minded will be only too delighted to be saying everywhere that you are neglecting an obvious duty if you go wandering off to see and judge the ends of this world, with which, after all, you have really no especial concern.’

‘Oh, well, and if they do?’ says Manuel, shrugging lordlily. ‘There is no hurt in talking.’

‘Yes, Manuel, but such shiftless wandering, into uncomfortable places that nobody ever heard of, would have that appearance. Now there is nothing I would more thoroughly enjoy than to go travelling about at adventure with you, and to be a countess means nothing whatever to me. I am sure I do not in the least care to live in a palace of my own, and be bothered with fine clothes and the responsibility of looking after my rubies, and with servants and parties every day. But you see, darling, I simply could not bear to have people thinking ill of my dear husband, and so, rather than have that happen, I am willing to put up with these things.’

‘Oh, ah!’ says Manuel, and he began pulling vexedly at his little grey beard, ‘and does one obligation beget another as fast as this! Now whatever would you have me do?’

‘Obviously, you must get troops from King Ferdinand, and drive that awful Asmund out of Poictesme.’

‘Dear me!’ says Manuel, ‘but what a simple matter you make of it. Shall I attend to it this afternoon?’

‘Now, Manuel, you speak without thinking, for you could not possibly reconquer all Poictesme this afternoon.’

‘Oh!’ says Manuel.

‘No, not single-handed, my darling. You would first have to get troops to help you, both horse and foot.’

‘My dearest, I only meant—’

‘Even then, it will probably take quite a while to kill off all the Northmen.’

‘Niafer, will you let me explain—’

‘Besides, you are miles away from Poictesme. You could not even manage to get there this afternoon.’

Manuel put his hand over her mouth. 'Niafer, when I spoke of subjugating Poictesme this afternoon I was attempting a mild joke. I will never any more attempt light irony in your presence, for I perceive that you do not appreciate my humour. Meanwhile, I repeat to you, No, no, a thousand times, no! To be called Count of Poictesme sounds well, it strokes the hearing: but I will not be set to root and vegetate in a few hundred spadefuls of dirt. No, for I have but one lifetime here, and in that lifetime I mean to see this world and all the ends of this world, that I may judge them. And I,' he concluded decisively, 'am Manuel, who follow after my own thinking and my own desire.'

Niafer began to weep. 'I simply cannot bear to think of what people will say of you.'

'Come, come, my dear,' says Manuel, 'this is preposterous.'

Niafer wept.

'You will only end by making yourself ill!' says Manuel.

Niafer continued to weep.

'My mind is quite made up,' says Manuel, 'so what, in God's name, is the good of this?'

Niafer now wept more and more broken-heartedly. And the big champion sat looking at her, and his broad shoulders relaxed. He viciously kicked at the heavy glistening green head of the dragon, still bleeding uglily there at his feet, but that did no good whatever. The dragon-queller was beaten. He could do nothing against such moisture, his resolution was dampened and his independence was washed away by this salt flood. And they say too that, now his youth was gone, Dom Manuel began to think of quietness and of soft living more resignedly than he acknowledged.

'Very well, then,' Manuel says, by and by, 'let us cross the Loir, and ride south to look for your infernal coronet with the rubies in it, and for your servants and for your fine home.'

So in the Christmas holidays they bring a fine burly squinting grey-haired warrior to King Ferdinand, in a lemon grove behind the royal palace. Here the sainted King, duly equipped with his halo and his goose-feather, was used to perform the lesser miracles on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

The King was delighted by the change in Manuel's looks, and said that experience and maturity were fine things to be suggested by the appearance of a nobleman in Manuel's position. But, a pest! as for giving him any troops with which to conquer Poictesme, that was quite another matter. The King needed his own soldiers for his own ends, which necessitated the immediate capture of Cordova. Meanwhile, here were the Prince de Gâtinais and the Marquess di Paz, who also had come with this insane request, the one for soldiers to help him against the Philistines, and the other against the Catalans.

'Everybody to whom I ever granted a fief seems to need troops nowadays,' the King grumbled, 'and if any one of you had any judgement whatever you would have retained your lands once they were given you.'

'Our deficiencies, sire,' says the young Prince de Gâtinais, with considerable spirit, 'have not been altogether in judgement, but rather in the support afforded us by our liege-lord.'

This was perfectly true; but inasmuch as such blunt truths are not usually flung at a king and a saint, now Ferdinand's thin brows went up.

'Do you think so?' said the King. 'We must see about it. What is that, for example?'

He pointed to the pool by which the lemon-trees were watered, and the Prince glanced at the yellow object afloat in this pool. 'Sire,' said de Gâtinais, 'it is a lemon which has fallen from one of the trees.'

'So you judge it to be a lemon. And what do you make of it, di Paz?' the King inquired.

The Marquess was a statesman who took few chances. He walked to the edge of the pool, and looked at the thing before committing himself: and he came back smiling. 'Ah, sire, you have indeed contrived a cunning sermon against

hasty judgement, for, while the tree is a lemon-tree, the thing that floats beneath it is an orange.'

'So you, Marquess, judge it to be an orange. And what do you make of it, Count of Poictesme?' the King asks now.

If di Paz took few chances, Manuel took none at all. He waded into the pool, and fetched out the thing which floated there. 'King,' says big Dom Manuel, sagely blinking his bright pale eyes, it is the half of an orange.'

Said the King: 'Here is a man who is not lightly deceived by the vain shows of this world, and who values truth more than dry shoes. Count Manuel, you shall have your troops, and you others must wait until you have acquired Count Manuel's powers of judgement, which, let me tell you, are more valuable than any fief I have to give.'

So when the spring had opened, Manuel went into Poictesme at the head of a very creditable army, and Dom Manuel summoned Duke Asmund to surrender all that country. Asmund, who was habitually peevish under the puckerel curse, refused with opprobrious epithets, and the fighting began.

Manuel had, of course, no knowledge of generalship, but King Ferdinand sent the Conde de Tohil Vaca as Manuel's lieutenant. Manuel now figured imposingly in gold armour, and the sight of his shield bearing the rampant stallion and the motto *Mundus vult decipi* became in battle a signal for the more prudent among his adversaries to distinguish themselves in some other part of the conflict. It was whispered by backbiters that in counsel and in public discourse Dom Manuel sonorously repeated the orders and opinions provided by Tohil Vaca: either way, the official utterances of the Count of Poictesme roused everywhere the kindly feeling which one reserves for old friends, so that no harm was done.

To the contrary, Dom Manuel now developed an invaluable gift for public speaking, and in every place which he conquered and occupied he made powerful addresses to the surviving inhabitants before he had them hanged, exhorting all right-thinking persons to crush the military autocracy of Asmund. Besides, as Manuel pointed out, this was a struggle such as the world had never known, in that it was a war to end war for ever, and to

ensure eternal peace for everybody's children. Never, as he put it strikingly, had men fought for a more glorious cause. And so on and so on, said he, and these uplifting thoughts had a fine effect upon everyone.

‘How wonderfully you speak!’ Dame Niafer would say admiringly.

And Manuel would look at her queerly, and reply: ‘I am earning your home, my dear, and your servants’ wages, and some day these verbal jewels will be perpetuated in a real coronet. For I perceive that a former acquaintance of mine was right in pointing out the difference between men and the other animals.’

‘Ah, yes, indeed!’ said Niafer very gravely, and not attaching any particular meaning to it, but generally gathering that she and Manuel were talking about something edifying and pious. For Niafer was now a devout Christian, as became a Countess of Poictesme, and nobody anywhere entertained a more sincere reverence for solemn noises.

‘For instance,’ Dame Niafer continued, ‘they tell me that these lovely speeches of yours have produced such an effect upon the Philistines yonder that their Queen Stultitia has proffered an alliance, and has promised to send you light cavalry and battering-rams.’

‘It is true she has promised to send them, but she has not done so.’

‘None the less, Manuel, you will find that the moral effect of her approbation will be invaluable; and, as I so often think, that is the main thing after all.’

‘Yes, yes,’ says Manuel impatiently, ‘we have plenty of moral approbation and fine speaking here, and in the South we have a saint to work miracles for us, but it is Asmund who has that army of splendid reprobates, and they do not value morality and rhetoric the worth of an old finger-nail.’

So the fighting continued throughout that spring, and in Poictesme it seemed very important and unexampled, just as wars usually appear to the people that are engaged in them: and thousands of men were slain, to the regret of their mothers and sweethearts, and very often of their wives. And there was the ordinary amount of unparalleled military atrocities and perfidies and

ravishments and burnings and so on, and the endurers took their agonies so seriously that it is droll to think of how unimportant it all was in the outcome.

For this especial carnage took place so long ago that it is now not worth the pains involved to rephrase for inattentive hearing the combat of the knights at Perdigon, or the once famous battle of the tinkers, or to retell how the inflexible syndics of Montors were imprisoned in a cage and slain by mistake; nor to relate how the Northmen burned the bridge of boats at Manneville; and how Asmund trod upon a burned-through beam at the disastrous siege of Evre, and so fell thirty feet into the midst of his enemies and broke his leg, but dealt so valorously that he got safe away; and how at Lisuarte unarmoured peasants beat off Manuel's followers with scythes and pitchforks and clubs.

Time has washed out the significance of these old heroisms as the colour is washed from flimsy cloths; so that chroniclers act wisely when they wave aside with undipped pens the episode of the brave Siennese and their green poison at Bellegarde, and the doings of the Anti-Pope there, and grudge the paper needful to record the remarkable method by which gaunt Tohil Vaca levied a tax of a livre on every chimney in Poictesme.

It is not even possible nowadays to put warm interest in those once notable pots of blazing sulphur and fat and quicklime that were emptied over the walls of Storisende, to the discomfort of Manuel's men. For although this was a very heroic war, with a parade of every sort of high moral principle, and with the most sonorous language employed upon both sides, it somehow failed to bring about either the reformation or the ruin of humankind: and after the conclusion of the murdering and general breakage the world went on pretty much as it has done after all other wars, with a vague notion that a deal of time and effort had been unprofitably invested, and a conviction that it would be inglorious to say so.

Therefore it suffices to report that there was much killing and misery everywhere, and that in June the Conde de Tohil Vaca was taken, and murdered, with rather horrible jocosity which used unusually a heated poker, and Manuel's forces were defeated and scattered.

THE RING OF HANS CARVEL

Fredric Brown

Among the classic works of humour, the books of François Rabelais, who gave his name to that exuberant kind of wit known as Rabelaisian, contain several tales of fallible heroes, which have subsequently provided inspiration for modern writers such as the next contributor. Rabelais, a French monk turned satirist, suffered the same fate as James Branch Cabell in having his work banned by the authorities, although his most popular books, The Great and Inestimable Chronicles of the Grand and Enormous Giant Gargantua (1532) and its sequel, Pantagruel, which appeared the same year—both published as by ‘Alcofribas Nasier’ (an anagram of his real name)—are now deservedly listed as two of the finest and most influential works of satire ever written.

Fredric Brown (1906—1972), who was born in Cincinnati and was employed as an office worker and journalist before becoming a full-time writer, is today admired equally for his detective novels, works of Science Fiction and fantasy stories, although according to Brian Ash in Who’s Who in Science Fiction (1976) he is also ‘particularly cherished for the humour and satire he brought to many of his tales’. Brown’s great talent for joke climaxes was first revealed in one of his earliest pieces, ‘Placet is a Crazy Place’ (1946), which has been called the best short story ever written about a comically improbable world. This and other gems from his pen were later collected in Space on My Hands (1951), Nightmares and Geezenstacks (1961) and Daymares (1968).

Brown’s reputation as a master of humorous fantasy was, however, firmly established with two novels: What Mad Universe (1949), a satire on an alternative Earth where various Science Fiction conventions become reality, and Martians, Go Home (1955), in which the little green invaders turn out to be quite the opposite of those in H. G. Wells’ classic. Brown is also credited with having written the shortest SF story ever: “The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door...” One of his great skills was undoubtedly in parodying the work of writers he liked such as Rabelais and James Branch Cabell, and this facet can be seen in the

following story, first published in 1961, which contains similarities in style to both earlier authors. Indeed, underneath the title, he added the words: 'Retold and somewhat modernised from the works of Rabelais.'

* * * *

Once upon a time there lived in France a prosperous but somewhat ageing jeweller named Hans Carvel. Besides being a studious and learned man, he was a likeable man. And a man who liked women and although he had not lived a celibate life, or missed anything, had happened to remain a bachelor until he was—well, let's call his age as pushing sixty and not mention from which direction he was pushing it.

At that age he fell in love with a bailiff's daughter—a young and a beautiful girl, spirited and vivacious, a dish to set before a king.

And married her.

Within a few weeks of the otherwise happy marriage Hans Carvel began to suspect that his young wife, whom he still loved deeply, might be just a little *too* spirited, a little *too* vivacious. That what he was able to offer her—aside from money, of which he had a sufficiency—might not be enough to keep her contented. *Might* not, did I say? *Was* not.

Not unnaturally he began to suspect, and then to be practically certain, that she was supplementing her love life with several—or possibly even many—other and younger men.

This preyed on his mind. It drove him, in fact, to a state of distraction in which he had bad dreams almost nightly.

In one of these dreams, one night, he found himself talking to the Devil, explaining his dilemma, and offering the traditional price for something, *anything*, that would assure him of his wife's faithfulness.

In his dream, the Devil nodded readily and told Hans: 'I will give you a magic ring. You will find it when you awaken. As long as you wear this ring

it will be utterly and completely impossible for your wife to be unfaithful to you without your knowledge and consent.'

And the Devil vanished and Hans Carvel awakened.

And found that he was indeed wearing a ring, as it were, and that what the Devil had promised him was indeed true.

But his young wife had also awakened and was stirring, and she said to him: 'Hans, darling, not your finger. *That* is not what goes *there*.'

THE BAIT

Fritz Leiber

The American fantasist Fritz Leiber, who is credited with inventing the term 'Sword and Sorcery', was also the creator of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, two unique adventurers introduced in 1939, whose exploits have subsequently been acknowledged as among the most literate and important series in the genre. The pair were the first of many such partnerships in fantasy fiction, although Leiber's masterstroke was to make Fafhrd a huge, powerful man while his companion was small, nimble and quick-witted. Their deeds, which Leiber continued to recount throughout his life, are a mixture of high drama and sly humour which began with the aptly entitled 'Two Sought Adventure' (Unknown, August 1939) and continued in novelettes, short stories and books including Swords Against Wizardry (1968), Swords Against Death (1970) and Swords and Ice-Magic (1977). In an interview in 1982 Leiber claimed that it was 'bringing together the reading of my youth, Robert E. Howard and James Branch Cabell, that more or less got Fafhrd and the Mouser started—plus a little of my knowledge of the sagas of Norse mythology.' Fafhrd he envisaged as less of a superman than Howard's Conan—a tall, gangly Nordic figure who, some have said, was modelled on the author himself—while the Gray Mouser was a mixture of an effervescent college friend, Harry Fischer, who had introduced him to fantasy fiction, and the mischievous Norse god, Loki. The kingdom in which they operate, Lankhmar, was once described by Leiber as a kind of 'Baghdad on the Pacific Coast'.

Fritz Leiber (1910—1992) was born in Chicago, the son of a Shakespearean actor, and for a time he appeared with his father's touring company. Leaving the stage, he worked as an associate editor on Science Digest for twelve years before the success of his novel Conjure Wife (1943), a tale of witchcraft in a modern university, enabled him to become a full-time writer. It has been filmed twice and adapted for the TV series Moment of Fear. This was followed by a string of horror stories, Science Fiction tales and more 'Sword and Sorcery', which won him admiring followers in all three genres and the accolade of 'Grand Master of

American Fantasy'. The following Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser story, in which the pair squabble over a girl of supernatural beauty, is for me one of the most amusing in his entire oeuvre. It was originally written for Whispers magazine in December 1973.

* * * *

Fafhrd the Northerner was dreaming of a great mound of gold.

The Gray Mouser the Southerner, ever cleverer in his forever competitive fashion, was dreaming of a heap of diamonds. He hadn't tossed out all of the yellowish ones yet, but he guessed that already his glistening pile must be worth more than Fafhrd's glowing one.

How he knew in his dream what Fafhrd was dreaming was a mystery to all beings in Newhon, except perhaps Sheelba of the Eyeless Face and Ninguable of the Seven Eyes, respectively the Mouser's and Fafhrd's sorcerer-mentors. Maybe, a vast, black basement mind shared by the two was involved.

Simultaneously they awoke, Fafhrd a shade more slowly, and sat up in bed.

Standing midway between the feet of their cots was an object that fixed their attention. It weighed about eighty pounds, was about four feet eight inches tall, had long straight black hair pendant from head, had ivory-white skin, and was as exquisitely formed as a slim chesspiece of the King of Kings carved from a single moonstone. It looked thirteen, but the lips smiled a cool self-infatuated seventeen, while the gleaming deep eye-pools were first blue melt of the Ice Age. Naturally, she was naked.

'She's mine!' the Gray Mouser said, always quick from the scabbard.

'No, she's mine!' Fafhrd said almost simultaneously, but conceding by that initial 'No' that the Mouser had been first, or at least he had expected the Mouser to be first.

'I belong to myself and to no one else, save two or three virile demidevils,' the small naked girl said, though giving them each in turn a most nymphish

lascivious look.

‘I’ll fight you for her,’ the Mouser proposed.

‘And I you,’ Fafhrd confirmed, slowly drawing Graywand from its sheath beside his cot.

The Mouser likewise slipped scalpel from its rat-skin container.

The two heroes rose from their cots.

At this moment, two personages appeared a little behind the girl— from thin air, to all appearances. Both were at least nine feet tall. They had to bend, not to bump the ceiling. Cobwebs tickled their pointed ears. The one on the Mouser’s side was black as wrought iron. He swiftly drew a sword that looked forged from the same material.

At the same time, the other newcomer—bone-white, this one—produced a silver-seeming sword, likely steel plated with tin.

The nine-footer opposing the Mouser aimed a skull-splitting blow at the top of his head. The Mouser parried in prime and his opponent’s weapon shrieked off to the left. Whereupon, smartly swinging his rapier widdershins, the Mouser slashed off the black fiend’s head, which struck the floor with a horrid clank.

The white afreet opposing Fafhrd trusted to a downward thrust. But the Northerner, catching his blade in a counter-clockwise bind, thrust him through, the silvery sword missing Fafhrd’s right temple by the thinness of a hair.

With a petulant stamp of her naked heel, the nymphet vanished into thin air, or perhaps Limbo.

The Mouser made to wipe off his blade on the cotclothes, but discovered there was no need. He shrugged. ‘What a misfortune for you, comrade,’ he said in a voice of mocking woe. ‘Now you will not be able to enjoy the delicious chit as she disports herself on your heap of gold.’

Fafhrd moved to cleanse Graywand on *his* sheets, only to note that it too was altogether unbloodied. He frowned. 'Too bad for you, best of friends,' he sympathised. 'Now you won't be able to possess her as she writhes with girlish abandon on your couch of diamonds, their glitter striking opalescent tones from her pale flesh.'

'Mauger that effeminate artistic garbage, how did you know that I was dreaming diamonds?' the Mouser demanded.

'How did I?' Fafhrd asked himself wonderingly. At last he begged the question with, 'The same way, I suppose, that you knew I was dreaming of gold.'

The two excessively long corpses chose that moment to vanish, and the severed head with them.

Fafhrd said sagely, 'Mouser, I begin to believe that supernatural forces were involved in this morning's haps.'

'Or else hallucinations, oh great philosopher,' the Mouser countered somewhat peevishly.

'Not so,' Fafhrd corrected, 'for see, they've left their weapons behind.'

'True enough,' the Mouser conceded, rapaciously eyeing the wrought-iron and tin-plated blades on the floor. 'Those will fetch a fancy price on Curio Court.'

The Great Gong of Lankhmar, sounding distantly through the walls, boomed out the twelve funereal strokes of noon, when burial parties plunge spade into earth.

'An after-omen,' Fafhrd pronounced. 'Now we know the source of the supernal force. The Shadowland, terminus of all funerals.'

'Yes,' the Mouser agreed. 'Prince Death, that eager boy, has had another go at us.'

Fafhrd splashed cool water onto his face from a great bowl set against the wall. 'Ah well,' he spoke through the splashes, ' 'twas a pretty bait at least. Truly, there's nothing like a nubile girl, enjoyed or merely glimpsed naked, to give one an appetite for breakfast.'

'Indeed yes,' the Mouser replied, as he tightly shut his eyes and briskly rubbed his face with a palm full of white brandy. 'She was just the sort of immature dish to kindle your satyrish taste for maids newly budded.'

In the silence that came as the splashing stopped, Fafhrd inquired innocently, '*Whose* satyrish taste?'

A GOOD KNIGHT'S WORK

Robert Bloch

The next story is an example of the continuing use of the dragon-hunting theme in modern humorous fantasy. The tradition of the old sagas which F. Anstey brought into the twentieth century is here revived in a new guise by Robert Bloch, who is perhaps best known for his horror novel Psycho (1959) and the film of it by Alfred Hitchcock, but is also highly regarded as a writer of witty fantasy displaying what has been called his 'graveyard humour. Although Bloch's early stories were mostly tales of horror, his skill in writing comic fantasy was revealed in the series of Lefty Feep stories which he contributed to Fantastic Adventures in the Forties. Describing the exploits of a wisecracking hustler, the titles of these tales say all about the contents: 'Time Wounds All Heels', 'Jerk the Giant Killer', 'Genie with the Light Brown Hair' and 'Stuporman'. The enthusiasm with which this series was received by readers encouraged Bloch to return to writing humorous fantasy throughout the rest of his life, and indeed one of the last stories he wrote was very much in the Lefty Feep tradition, 'The Shrink and the Mink'.

Robert Bloch (1917—1994) was born in Chicago, the home town of the legendary pulp Weird Tales, and, not surprisingly, his first horror stories appeared in its pages. Soon, however, he was broadening his style, giving free rein to his ghoulish sense of humour and ultimately parodying a whole cross-section of the great writers of supernatural fiction, from H. P. Lovecraft to Stephen King. The success of Psycho opened the door to films, and he scripted numerous Hollywood pictures as well as a series of anthology movies made in England by Amicus and based upon his own short stories. In 1975 his contribution to the genre was honoured by a 'Life Award' at the First World Fantasy Convention, and he was regarded as one of the pre-eminent figures in fantasy fiction at the time of his sad death in 1994.

His talent, however, lives on—and especially in stories like this hilarious drama of a dragon-slayer on the loose in Thirties America, in which his literary model was unmistakably Damon Runyon, the famous chronicler of

hardboiled characters with soft hearts. First published in Unknown Worlds in November 1942, the story imitates Runyon's present-tense style of writing, but is equally full of Robert Bloch's own special brand of comic invention.

* * * *

I am stepping on the gas, air is pouring into the truck and curses are pouring out, because I feel like I get up on the wrong side of the gutter this morning.

Back in the old days I am always informing the mob how I am going to get away from it all and buy a little farm in the country and raise chickens. So now I raise chickens and wish I am back in the old days raising hell.

It is one of those things, and today it is maybe two or three of them, in spades. Perhaps you are lucky and do not live in the Corn Belt, so I will mention a few items to show that the guy naming it knows what he's talking about.

This morning I wake up at four a.m. because fifty thousand sparrows are holding a Communist rally under the window. I knock my shins over a wheelbarrow in the back yard because the plumbing is remote. When I get dressed I have to play tag with fifty chickens I am taking to market, and by the time that's over I am covered with more feathers than a senator who gets adopted by Indians in a news-reel. After which all I do is load the cacklers on the truck, drive fifty miles to town, sell biddies at a loss, and drive back—strictly without breakfast.

Breakfast I must catch down the road at the tavern, where I got to pay ten bucks to Thin Tommy Malloon for protection.

That is my set-up and explains why I am not exactly bubbling over with good spirits. There is nothing to do about it but keep a stiff upper lip—mostly around the bottle I carry with me on the trip back.

Well, I am almost feeling better after a few quick ones, and am just about ready to stop my moans and groans when I spot this sign on the road.

I don't know how it is with you. But this is how it is with me. I do not like signs on the road a bit, and of all the signs I do not like, the *SIAMESE SHAVE* signs I hate in spades.

They stand along the highway in series, and each of them has a line of poetry on it so when you pass them all you read a little poem about *SIAMESE SHAVE*. They are like the Old Lady Goose rhymes they feed the juveniles, and I do not have any love for Ma Goose and her poetry.

Anyhow, when I see this first sign I let out some steam and take another nip. But I cannot resist reading the sign because I always do. It says:

DON'T WEAR A LONG BEARD

And a little further on the second one reads:

LIKE A GOAT

Pretty soon I come to the third one, saying:

JUST TAKE A RAZOR

And all at once I'm happy, hoping maybe somebody made a mistake and the fourth sign will say:

AND CUT YOUR THROAT!

So I can hardly wait to see the last one, and I'm looking ahead on the road, squinting hard. Then I slam on the brakes.

No, I don't see a sign. There is a *thing* blocking the road, instead. *Two* things.

One of these things is a horse. At least, it looks more like a horse than anything else I can see on four drinks. It is a horse covered with a kind of awning, or tent that hangs down over its legs and out on its neck. In fact, I notice that this horse is wearing a mask over its head with eyeholes, like it belongs to the Ku Klux Klan.

The other *thing* is riding the horse. It is all silver, from head to foot, and there is a long plume growing out of its head. It looks like a man, and it has a long, sharp pole in one hand and the top off a garbage can in the other.

Now when I look at this party I am certain of only one thing. This is not the Lone Ranger.

When I drive a little closer my baby-blue eyes tell me that what I am staring at is a man dressed up in a suit of armour, and that the long, sharp pole is a little thing like a twelve-foot spear with a razor on the end.

Who he is and why he is dressed up this way may be very interesting to certain parties like the State police, but I am very far away from being one. Also I am very far away from Thin Tommy Malloon who is waiting for my ten bucks protection money.

So when I see Old Ironsides blocking the road, I place my head outside the window and request, 'Get the hell out of the way, buddy!' in a loud but polite voice.

Which turns out to be a mistake, in spades and no trump.

The party in the tin tuxedo just looks at the truck coming his way, and cocks his iron head when he sees steam coming from the radiator. The exhaust is beginning to make trombone noises, because I am stepping hard on the gas, and this seems to make up the heavy dresser's mind for him.

'Yoiks!' howls his voice behind his helmet. 'A dragon!'

And all at once he levels that lance of his, knocks his tootsies against the horse's ribs, and starts coming head-on for the truck.

'For Pendragon and England!' he bawls, over the clanking. And charges ahead like a baby tank.

That twelve-foot razor of his is pointed straight for my radiator, and I do not wish him to cut my motor, so naturally I swing the old truck out of the way.

This merely blows the radiator cap higher than the national debt, and out shoots enough steam and hot air to supply a dozen congressmen.

The horse rears up, and the tintype lets out a yap, letting his lance loose. Instead of hitting my radiator, it smashes my windshield.

Also my temper. I stop the truck and get out, fast. 'Now, listen, buddy,' I reason with him.

'Aha!' comes the voice from under the helmet. 'A wizard!' He uses a brand of double-talk I do not soon forget. 'Halt ye, for it is Pallagyn who speaks.'

I am in no mood for orations, so I walk up to him, waving a pipe wrench.

'Bust my windows, eh, buddy? Monkey business on a public highway, is it? I'm going to—Yow!'

I am a personality that seldom hollers 'Yow!' even at a burlesque show, but when this armour-plated jockey slides off his horse and comes for me, he is juggling a sharp six feet of sword. And six feet of sword sailing for your neck is worth a 'Yow!' any day, I figure.

I also figure I had better duck unless I want a shave and a haircut, and it is lucky for me that Iron-lung has to move slow when he whams his sword down at me.

I come up under his guard and give him a rap on the old orange with my pipe wrench.

There is no result.

The steel king drops his sword and lets out another roar, and I caress his helmet again with the wrench. Still no result. I get my result on the third try. The wrench breaks.

And then his iron arms grab me, and I am in for it.

The first thing I know, everything is turning black as solitary, and my sparring partner is reaching for a shiv at his belt. I get my foot there, fast.

All I can do is push forward, but it works. About a hundred and fifty pounds of armour loses balance, and there is nothing for the guy inside to do except to go down with it. Which he does, on his back. Then I am on his chest, and I roll up the Venetian blind on the front of his helmet.

‘Hold, enough!’ comes the double-talk from inside. ‘Prithee, hold!’

‘OK, buddy. But open up that mail box of yours. I want to see the face of the jerk that tries to get me into a traffic accident with a load of tin.’

He pulls up the shutters, and I get a peek at a purple face decorated with red whiskers. There are blue eyes, too, and they look down, ashamed.

‘Ye are the first, O Wizard, to gaze upon the vanquished face of Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep,’ he mumbles.

I get off his chest like it was the hot seat. Because, although I am very fond of nuts, I like them only in fruit cakes.

‘I’ve got to be going,’ I mention. ‘I don’t know who you are or why you are running around like this, and I maybe ought to have you run in, but I got business up the road, see? So long.’

I start walking away and turn around. ‘Besides, my name is not O. Wizard.’

‘Verily,’ says the guy who calls himself Sir Pallagyn, getting up slow, with a lot of rattling. ‘Ye are a wizard, for ye ride a dragon breathing fire and steam.’

I am thinking of the fire and steam Thin Tommy Malloon is breathing right now, so I pay little or no attention, but get in the truck. Then this Pallagyn comes running up and yells, ‘Wait!’

‘What for?’

‘My steed and arms are yours by right of joust.’

Something clicks inside my head, and even if it is an eight ball, I get interested. ‘Wait a minute,’ I suggest. ‘Just who are you and where do you

hang out?’

‘Why,’ says he, ‘as I bespoke, O Wizard—I am Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep, sent here ensorcelled by Merlin, from Arthur’s court at Camelot. And I hang out at the greves in my armour,’ he adds, tucking in some cloth sticking out of the chinks and joints in his heavy suit.

‘Huh?’ is about the best I can do.

‘And besting me in fair combat, ye gain my steed and weapons, by custom of the joust.’ He shakes his head, making a noise like a Tommy-gun. ‘Merlin will be very angry when he hears of this, I wot.’

‘Merlin?’

‘Merlin, the Grey Wizard, who sent me upon the quest,’ he explains. ‘He it was who sped me forward in Time, to quest for the Cappadocian Tabouret.’

Now I am not altogether a lug—as you can tell by the way I look up some of the spelling on these items—and when something clicks inside my noggin it means I am thinking, but difficult.

I know I am dealing with the worst kind of screwball—the kind that bounces—but still there is some sense in what he is saying. I see this King Arthur and this Merlin in a picture once, and I see also some personalities in armour that are called knights, which means they are King Arthur’s trigger men. They hang out around a big table in a stone hideout and are always spoiling for trouble and going off on quests—which means putting the goniff on stuff which doesn’t belong to them, or copping dames from other knights.

But I figure all this happens maybe a hundred years ago, or so, over in Europe, before they throw away their armour and change into coloured shirts to put the rackets on an organised paying basis.

And this line about going forward in Time to find something is practically impossible, unless you go for Einstein’s theory, which I don’t, preferring Jane Fonda.

Still, it is you might say unusual, so I answer this squirrel. ‘What you’re trying to tell me is that you come here from King Arthur’s court and some magician sends you to find something?’

‘Verily, O Wizard. Merlin counselled me that I might not be believed,’ says Pallagyn, sadlike. He chews on his moustache, without butter. He almost looks like he is promoting a weeper.

‘I believe you, buddy,’ I say, wanting to cheer him up and also get out of here.

‘Then take my mount and weapons—it is required by law of the joust,’ he insists.

Right then I figure I would rather take a drink. I do. It makes me feel better. I get out and walk over to the oat burner. ‘I don’t know what to do with this four-legged glue barrel,’ I tell him, ‘or your manicure set, either. But if it makes you happy, I will take them with me.’

So I grab the nag and take him around back of the truck, let down the ramp and put him in. When I get back, Sir Pallagyn is piling his steel polo set into the front seat.

‘I place these on the dragon for thee,’ he says.

‘This isn’t a dragon,’ I explain. ‘It’s a Ford.’

‘Ford? Merlin did not speak of that creature.’ He climbs into the seat after his cutlery, looking afraid the steering wheel will bite him.

‘Hey, where you going?’

‘With thee, O Wizard. The steed and weapons are thine, but I must follow them, even into captivity. It is the law of the quest.’

‘You got laws on the brain, that’s your trouble. Now listen, I don’t like hitchhikers—’

Then I gander at my ticker and see it is almost ten and remember I am to meet Thin Tommy at eight. So I figure, why not? I will give this number a short lift down the pike and dump him where it is quiet and forget him. Maybe I can also find out whether or not there is somebody missing from Baycrest, which is the local laughing academy, and turn him in. Anyway, I have my date to keep, so I start the truck rolling.

This Pallagyn lets out a sort of whistle through his whiskers when I hit it up, so I say, 'What's the matter, buddy, are you thirsty?'

'No,' he gasps. 'But we are flying!'

'Only doing fifty,' I tell him. 'Look at the speedometer.'

'Fifty what? Speedometer?'

My noggin is clicking like a slot machine in a church bazaar. This baby isn't faking! I get another look at his armour and see it is solid stuff—not like fancy-dress costumes, but real heavy, with little designs in gold and silver running through it. And he doesn't know what a car is, or a speedometer!

'You need a drink,' I say, taking it for him, and then passing him the bottle.

'Mead?' he says.

'No, Haig & Haig. Try a slug.'

He tilts the bottle and takes a terrific triple-tongue. He lets out a roar and turns redder than his whiskers.

'I am bewitched!' he yells. 'Ye black wizard!'

'Hold it. You'll cool off in a minute. Besides, I'm not a wizard. I'm a truck farmer, believe it or not, and don't let them kid you down at the Bastille. I'm through with the rackets.'

He gets quieter in a minute and begins to ask me questions. Before I know it, I am explaining who I am and what I am doing, and after another drink it doesn't seem so screwy to me any more.

Even when he tells me about this Merlin cat putting a spell on him and sending him through Time to go on a quest, I swallow it like my last shot. I break down and tell him to call me Butch. In a few minutes we're practically cell mates.

'Ye may call me Pallagyn,' he says.

'OK, Pal. How about another slug?'

This time he is more cautious, and it must go down fairly well, because he smacks his lips and doesn't even turn pink.

'Might I enquire as to your destination, O Butch?' he lets out after a minute or so.

'You might,' I say. 'There it is, straight ahead.'

I point out the building we are just coming to. It is a roadhouse and tavern called 'The Blunder Inn', and it is in this rat hole that Thin Tommy Malloon hangs his hat and holster. This I explain to Pal.

'It doth not resemble a rat hole,' he comments.

'Any place where Thin Tommy gets in must be a rat hole,' I tell him, 'because Thin Tommy is a rat. He is a wrongo but strongo. Nevertheless, I must now go in and pay him his ten dollars for protection or he will sprinkle lye on my alfalfa.'

'What do you mean?' asks Pallagyn.

'Yes, Pal. I have a little farm, and I must pay Thin Tommy ten a week or else I will have trouble, such as finding ground glass in my hen mash, or a pineapple in my silo.'

'Ye pay to keep vandals from despoiling the crops?' asks the knight. 'Would it not be expedient to discover the miscreants and punish them?'

'I *know* who would wreck the farm if I didn't pay,' I reply. 'Thin Tommy.'

‘Ah, now methinks I comprehend thy plight. Thou art a serf, and this Thin Thomas is thy overlord.’

Somehow this remark, and the way Pallagyn says it, seems to show me up for a sucker. And I have just enough drink in me to resent it.

‘I am no serf,’ I shout. ‘As a matter of fact, I am waiting a long time to fix the clock of this Thin Tommy. So today I pay him no ten dollars, and I am going in to tell him so to what he calls his face.’

Pallagyn listens to me kind of close, because he seems pretty ignorant on English and grammar, but he catches on and smiles.

‘Spoken like a right true knight,’ he says. ‘I shall accompany ye on this mission, for I find in my heart a liking for thy steadfast purpose, and a hatred of Thin Thomas.’

‘Sit where you are,’ I says, fast. ‘I will handle this myself. Because Thin Tommy does not like strangers coming into his joint in the daytime without an invitation, and you are dressed kind of loud and conspicuous. So you stay here,’ I tell him, ‘and have a drink.’

And I pull up and climb out of the car and march into the tavern fast.

My heart is going fast also, because what I am about to do is enough to make any heart go fast in case Thin Tommy gets an idea to stop it from beating altogether. Which he sometimes does when he is irked, particularly over money.

Even so I walk up to the bar and sure enough, there is Thin Tommy standing there polishing the glasses with boxing gloves on. Only when I look again I realise these are not boxing gloves at all, but merely Thin Tommy’s hands.

Thin Tommy is not really thin, you understand, but is called that because he weighs about three hundred fifty pounds—stripped—such as once a month, when he takes a bath.

‘So, it’s you!’ he says, in a voice like a warden.

‘Hello, Thin Tommy,’ I greet him. ‘How are tricks?’

‘I will show you how tricks are if you do not cough up those ten berries fast and furious,’ grunts Thin Tommy. ‘All of the others have been here two or three hours ago, and I am waiting to go to the bank.’

‘Go right ahead,’ I tell him. ‘I wouldn’t stop you.’

Thin Tommy drops the glass he is polishing and leans over the bar. ‘Hand it over,’ he says through his teeth. They are big yellow teeth, all put together in not such a pleasant grin.

I grin right back at him because how can he see my knees shaking?

‘I have nothing for you, Tommy,’ I get out. ‘In fact, that is why I am here, to tell you that from now on I do not require protection any longer.’

‘Ha!’ yells Thin Tommy, pounding on the bar and then jumping around it with great speed for a man of his weight. ‘Bertram!’ he calls. ‘Roscoe!’

Bertram and Roscoe are Tommy’s two waiters, but I know Tommy is not calling them in to serve me.

They come running out of the back, and I see they have experience in such matters before, because Bertram is carrying a blackjack, and Roscoe has a little knife in his hand. The knife worries me most, because I am practically certain that Roscoe is never a Boy Scout.

By the time I see all this, Thin Tommy is almost on top of me, and he lets go with one arm for my jaw. I bend my head down just in time, but Thin Tommy’s other hand catches me from the side and slaps me across the room. I fall over a chair, and by this time Bertram and Roscoe are ready to wait on me. In fact, one of them pulls out the chair I fell over, and tries to hit me on the head with it.

I let out a yell and grab up a salt cellar from the table. This I push down Bertram’s mouth, and I am just ready to throw a little pepper in Roscoe’s

eyes when Thin Tommy crashes over, grabs the knife from Roscoe's hand, and backs me into the corner.

All at once I hear a crash outside the door, and somebody hollers, 'Yoiks! Pendragon and Pallagyn!'

Into the room gallops Sir Pallagyn. He has got his sword in one hand, and the empty bottle in the other, and he is full to the eyeballs with courage.

He lets the bottle go first and it catches Bertram in the side of the head, just when he is getting the salt cellar out of his mouth. Bertram slides down with a sort of moan, and Roscoe and Tommy turn around.

'It's one of them there rowboats, like in science fiction!' remarks Thin Tommy.

'Yeah,' says Roscoe, who is all at once very busy when Pallagyn comes for him with his sword. In fact Roscoe is so busy he falls over the chair and lands on his face, which gets caught in a cuspidor. Pallagyn is ready to whack him one when Thin Tommy drops hold of me and lets out a grunt.

He grabs up the blackjack and the dagger both in the same hand and lets fly. They bounce off Pallagyn's helmet, of course, so Thin Tommy tries a chair. This doesn't work, either, so he picks up the table.

Pallagyn just turns kind of surprised and starts coming for him. And Thin Tommy backs away.

'No...no—' he says. All at once he reaches into his hip pocket and pulls out the old lead poisoner.

'Watch out!' I yell, trying to get to Tommy before he can shoot. 'Duck, Pal—duck!'

Pallagyn ducks, but he is still running forward and his armour is so heavy he can't stop if he wants to keep from falling over.

The gun goes off over his head, but then Sir Pallagyn is going on, and he runs right into Thin Tommy, butting his head into his stomach. Thin Tommy just

gives one ‘Oooooof!’ and sits down backward, holding his belly where the helmet hits it, and he turns very green indeed.

Pallagyn sticks out his sword, but I say, ‘Never mind. This ought to teach him a lesson.’

Going out, Thin Tommy just manages to whisper to me, ‘Who’s that guy?’

‘That,’ I tell him, ‘is my new hired man. So if I was you, I wouldn’t plant any pineapples on my farm, because he is allergic to fruit.’

So we leave and climb back into the truck.

‘Thanks, Pal,’ I say. ‘You not only throw a scare into that monkey but you also save my life. I am in debt to you, whoever you are, and if Thin Tommy doesn’t serve such rotgut, I would take you back in and buy you a drink.’

‘Verily, ‘tis a trifle,’ says Pallagyn.

‘I’ll do you the same some day, Pal,’ I tell him. ‘You are my buddy.’

‘Ye could help me now, methinks.’

‘How?’

‘Why, in pursuit of my quest. I was sent here by Merlin to seek the Cappadocian Tabouret.’

‘I do not know anything about the new night clubs,’ I tell him. ‘I am not an uptown boy any longer.’

‘The Cappadocian Tabouret,’ says Pallagyn, ignoring me, ‘is the table on which the Holy Grail will rest, once we find it.’

‘Holy Grail?’

So Pallagyn begins to tell me a long yarn about how he is living in a castle with this King Arthur and a hundred other triggers who are all knights like he is. As near as I get it, all they do is sit around the drink and fight each other,

which makes it look like this King Arthur is not so good in controlling his mob.

The brain in this outfit is this guy Merlin, who is a very prominent old fuddy in the Magicians' Union. He is always sending the lads out to rescue some dames that have been snatched, or to knock off the hoods of other mobs, but what he is really interested in is this Holy Grail.

I cannot exactly catch what the Holy Grail is, except it's kind of a loving cup or trophy that has disappeared from some hock shop back there in the Middle Ages. But everybody is hot to find it, including the big boys in the mob like Sir Galahad and Sir Lancelot.

When Pallagyn mentions these two I know I hear of them some place, so naturally I ask questions and find out quite a bit about ancient times and knights and how they live and about the tournaments—which are pretty much the same as the Rose Bowl games, without a take—and many other items which are of great interest to an amateur scholar like myself.

But to slice a long story thin, Merlin cannot put the finger on this Holy Grail yet, although he is sending out parties every day to go on these quests for it. But he is a smart cookie in many another way, and one of his little tricks is to get himself high and then look into the future. For example, he tells King Arthur that he is going to have trouble some time ahead, and Pallagyn says he may be right, because he personally notices that this Sir Lancelot is making pigeon noises at Arthur's bird. But gossip aside, one of the things Merlin sees in the future is this Cappadocian Tabouret, which is a sacred relic on which the Holy Grail is supposed to sit.

So the old hophead calls in Sir Pallagyn and says he is sending him on a quest for the glory of Britain, to get this table for the Holy Grail and bring it back.

All Merlin can do to help him is to put a spell on him and send him into the future to the time where he sees the Tabouret.

And he tells him a little about these times and this country, sprinkles a little powder on him, and all at once Pallagyn is sitting on his horse in the middle

of County Trunk AA, where I find him.

‘That is not exactly the easiest story in the world to believe,’ I remark, when Pallagyn finishes.

‘Here I am,’ says the knight, which is about as good an answer as any.

For a minute I think I can understand how he must feel, being shipped off through Time into a new territory, without even a road map to help him. And since he is a good guy and saves my life, I figure the least I can do is try.

‘Doesn’t this old junkie give you a hint where it might be?’ I ask.

‘Merlin? Forsooth, he spoke of seeing it in a House of the Past.’

‘What kind of house?’

‘House of the Past, methinks he named it.’

‘Never hear of it,’ I says, ‘unless he means a funeral parlour. And you don’t catch me going into any stiff hotel.’

I say this as we are driving into my yard, and I stop the truck.

‘Let’s grab a plate of lunch,’ I suggest. ‘Maybe we can think of something.’

‘Lunch?’

‘Scoff. Bread.’

‘Here?’

‘Yeah. This is my pad-house.’

I salvage Pallagyn out of the car and take him inside. Then, while I fix the food, he sits there in the kitchen and asks me a thousand screwy questions. He is very ignorant about everything.

It turns out that back in his times, there is not enough civilisation to put in your ear. He doesn't know what a stove is, or gas, and I can see why they call them the Dark Ages when he tells me he never sees an electric light.

So I tell him everything, about cars and trains and aeroplanes and tractors and steamships, and then I break down and give him a few tips on how citizens live.

I hand it to him about the mobs and the rackets and the fuzz, and politics and elections. Then I give him a few tips about science—machine guns and armoured cars and tear gas and pineapples and fingerprints—all the latest stuff.

It is very hard to explain these matters to such an ignorant guy as this Pallagyn, but he is so grateful that I want to give it to him straight.

I even show him how to eat with a knife and fork, as it turns out at lunch that King Arthur's court doesn't go in for fancy table manners.

But I am not a schoolteacher, and after all, we are not getting any closer to Sir Pallagyn's problem, which is snatching this Tabouret in his quest.

So I begin asking him all over again about what it is and what it looks like and where this fink Merlin said to find it.

And all he manages to come clean with is that it's in the House of the Past, and that Merlin sees it in a jag.

'Big place,' he says. 'And the Tabouret is guarded by men in blue.'

'Police station?' I wonder.

'It is in a transparent coffin,' he says.

I never see any of these, though I hear Stinky Raffelano is in one after he catches his slugs last year.

'Ye can see but cannot touch it,' he remembers.

All at once I get it.

‘It’s under glass,’ I tell him. ‘In a museum.’

‘Glass?’

‘Never mind what that is,’ I say. ‘Sure—guards. House of the Past. It’s in a museum in town.’

I tell him what a museum is, and then start thinking.

‘First thing to do is get a line on where it is. Then we can figure out how to pull the snatch.’

‘Snatch?’

‘Steal it, Pal. Say—do you know what it looks like?’

‘Verily. Merlin described it in utmost detail, lest I err and procure a spurious Tabouret.’

‘Good. Give me a line on it, will you?’

‘Why, it is but a wooden tray of rough boards, with four short legs set at the corners. Brown it is in hue, and it spans scarce four hands in height. Plain it is, without decoration or adornment, for it was but crudely fashioned by the good Cappadocian Fathers.’

‘So,’ I say. ‘I think maybe I have a notion. Wait here,’ I tell him, ‘and improve your education.’

And I hand him a copy of a girlie magazine. I go down to the cellar, and when I come up after a while, Sir Pallagyn comes clanking up to me, all excited.

‘Pray, and who is this fair damsel?’ he asks, pointing out a shot of a broad in a bikini. ‘She has verily the appearance of the Lady of the Lake,’ he remarks. ‘Albeit with more...more—’

‘You said it, Pal,’ I agree. ‘Much more, in spades. But here—does this look like the table you’re after?’

‘Od’s blood, it is the very thing! From whence didst thou procure it?’

‘Why, it’s nothing but a piece of old furniture I find laying down in the basement. A footstool, but I knock the stuffing out of it and scrape off some varnish. Now, all you got to do is get this Merlin to wave his wand and call you back, and you hand him over the goods. He will never catch wise,’ I say, ‘and it will save us a lot of trouble.’

Pallagyn’s puss falls in a little and he starts chewing his red moustache again.

‘I fear, Sir Butch, thy ethics are not of the highest. I am a quest, nor could I present a spurious Tabouret in sight of mine own conscience.’

So I see I am in for it. Of course it will be easy for me to tell this tin can to go chase his quest, but somehow I feel I owe him a good turn.

‘I will work things out in a jiffy, Pal. You just go out and put your nag in the stable, and when you come back, I will have things set.’

‘On thy honour?’ he says, smiling all of a sudden.

‘Sure. Shake.’

He shakes until his armour rattles.

‘Never mind,’ I say. ‘Take care of the nag and leave it to me.’

He clunks out and I get busy on the phone.

When he comes back I am ready.

‘Come on out and hop in the truck,’ I invite. ‘We are on our way to pick up that furniture for you.’

‘Indeed? Then we really quest together, Sir Butch?’

‘Don’t ask any questions,’ I remark. ‘On your way.’

I notice he fumbles with that magazine a minute, and when he sees me looking he blushes.

‘I wouldst carry the image of this fair lady, as is the custom of the quest,’ he admits, tucking the picture of the broad in his helmet, so only her legs stick out over his forehead.

‘OK by me, Pal. But come on, we got a drive ahead of us.’

I grab up a pint, the fake Tabouret, and a glass cutter, head for the truck, and we’re off.

It is a long drive, and I have plenty of time to explain the lay of the land to Sir Pallagyn. I tell him how I call the museum and find out if they have this table in hock. Then I hang up and call back in a different voice, telling them that I am an express man with a suit of armour on hand for them which I will send over.

‘Pretty neat, hey, Pal?’ I ask.

‘But I do not comprehend. How did you talk to the museum if it is in the city and—’

‘I am a wizard myself,’ I let it go.

‘Still, I fail to perceive the plan. What place has armour in a House of the Past?’

‘Why, it’s a relic. Don’t you know nobody wears armour no more? It’s all bulletproof vests.’

‘Still, how doth that contrive for us to—snatch—the Tabouret?’

‘Don’t you get it? I’ll carry you into the museum like an empty suit of armour. Then we will spot this Tabouret. I will set you down in a corner, and when the joint closes up you can snatch it very quick indeed. You can use this glass

cutter to get it out, substitute this fake furniture in the case, and nobody will be hep to it the next morning. Simple.'

'By're Lady, 'tis a marvel of cunning!'

I admit it sounds groovy myself. But I notice we are now coming into some traffic, so I stop the truck and say, 'From now on you are just a suit of armour with nothing inside. You climb into the back of the truck so citizens will not give you the queer eye, and lie quiet. When we get to the museum I will drag you out, and you just hold still. Remember?'

'Verily.'

So Pallagyn hops into the back of the truck and lies down and I head into the city. Before I get too far I take myself a couple of quick ones because I am a little nervous, being so long since I pull a job.

I am not exactly floating but my feet do not touch bottom when we get downtown. Which is why I accidentally touch a fender of the car ahead of me when we stop in traffic. In fact I touch it so it drops off.

It is a big black Rolls, and an old Whitey with a mean-looking puss opens the door and leans out and says:

'Here now, you ruffian!'

'Who are you calling a ruffian, you bottle-nosed old baboon?' I answer, hoping to pass it off quiet.

'Aaaaargh!' says Whitey, climbing out of his buggy. 'Come along, Jefferson, and help me deal with this hoodlum.'

It is funny he should call me such when I feel sure he never sets peepers on me before in his life, but then it is a small world. And the chauffeur that hauls out after him is much too big to be running around in a small world. He is not only big but mean-looking, and he comes marching right at me along with old Whitey.

‘Why don’t you go away and soak your feet?’ I suggest, still wanting to be diplomatic and avoid trouble. But Whitey does not go for my good advice.

‘Let me have your licence,’ he growls. ‘I am going to do something about reckless drivers that smash into cars.’

‘Yeah,’ says the big chauffeur, sticking his red face into the window. ‘Maybe this fellow would slow down a little if he was driving with a couple of black eyes.’

‘Now wait a minute,’ I suggest. ‘I am very sorry if I bump into you and lose my temper, but I am on my way to the museum in a hurry with a rush order. If you look in the back of the truck, you will see a suit of armour I am delivering there.’

As it turns out this is not such a hot suggestion at that. Because when I see Whitey and the chauffeur marching at me I have the presence of mind to toss the whisky bottle in the back of the truck. And now Sir Pallagyn has got a gander at it, so when Whitey hangs his nose over the side, there is Pal, taking a snifter.

When he sees the old guy coming he stops still with his arm in the air, snapping his visor shut with the bottle in his mouth.

‘Here, what’s this?’ snaps Whitey.

‘Huh?’

‘What’s that bottle doing stuck in the visor of this helmet? And what’s making the arm hold on to it?’

‘I don’t know, mister. That’s how I find it when I unpack it this morning.’

‘Something wrong,’ insists old Whitey. ‘They didn’t drink whisky way back then.’

‘It’s pretty old whisky,’ I tell him.

‘I’ll vouch for that,’ he says, real nasty, ‘if your breath is any indication. I think you ought to be run in for drunken driving.’

‘Say,’ pipes up Jefferson, the big chauffeur. ‘Maybe this guy doesn’t even own the truck like he says. He might have stole this armour.’

Whitey smiles like a desk sergeant. ‘I never thought of that. Now, sir’—and he wheels on me fast—‘if you know so much about this particular bit of armour, perhaps you can tell me the name of its original wearer.’

‘Why...why...Sir Pallagyn of the Round Table,’ I stammer.

‘Pallagyn? Pallagyn? Never heard of him,’ snaps Whitey. ‘He never sat at the Round Table.’

‘He is always under it,’ I say. ‘Quite a lush.’

‘Preposterous! This is all a fraud of some sort.’

‘Look!’ Jefferson yells. ‘The whisky!’

We all look around, and sure enough the whisky is disappearing from the bottle because Pallagyn is gargling it down very quiet.

‘Fraud!’ says Whitey, again, and taps the helmet with his cane.

‘Come on, where did you steal this from?’ growls Jefferson, grabbing me by the collar. And Whitey keeps hitting the helmet.

‘Desist, by blessed St George!’ roars Pallagyn, sitting up. ‘Desist, ere I let air through thy weasand, thou aged conskiter!’

Whitey stands there with the cane in the air and his mouth is open wide enough to hang a canary in. Pal sees the cane and grabs for his sword.

‘A joust, is it?’ he yells.

And all around us the citizens are honking their horns and staring out, but when they see Pallagyn standing up and waving his pocket-knife they drive

away very fast.

‘Robot!’ mumbles Whitey.

‘Rodent, am I?’ and Pallagyn begins to slice away at Whitey’s breadbasket.

‘Hey!’ yells the chauffeur, dropping me. ‘Cut that!’ He makes a dive for the knight, but he sees him climbing up into the truck and bops him with the whisky bottle. The big guy falls down and sits still. Whitey dances around for a minute and then runs for his car.

‘I am a trustee of the museum,’ he bawls. ‘And whatever that thing is, it isn’t going on display. Witchcraft—that’s what it is!’

Now this is a fine time for the fuzz to show up, but when he does I quick-motion to Pal to hold still and grab the copper by the collar.

‘This guy and his chauffeur back into me,’ I say. ‘And if you smell the chauffeur you see he is drunk; as a matter of fact he is out. That old bird is also a lush, but me,’ and I step on the gas, ‘I am in a hurry to deliver this armour to a museum, and I do not wish to press charges.’

‘Hey—’ says the beat daddy, but I pull away fast. I am around the corner before he has time to cry ‘Wolf!’ and I take it up several alleys.

Meanwhile I bawl out Pallagyn in all suits.

‘From now on,’ I tell him, ‘you don’t make a move, no matter what happens. Understand?’

‘*Hic*,’ says Pallagyn.

‘The only way I can get you into the museum is for you to be quiet and lay limp,’ I say.

‘*Hic*.’

‘Here we are,’ I tell him, pulling up in back of the big grey building, into the loading zone.

‘Hic.’

‘Shut your trap,’ I snarl.

Pallagyn pulls down his visor.

‘No, wait.’ He is still hiccuping, so I yank his plume off and stuff it into his mouth.

‘Now, be quiet and leave it to me,’ I say. I get the table under one arm and slip the glass cutter into one pocket. Then I open the back of the truck and slide Pallagyn down the ramp to the ground.

‘Ugh! Oooof!’ he groans, under his helmet.

‘Sh! Here we go!’

It is not so easy to drag Pallagyn along by the arms, but I manage to hoist him up the platform and get him past the door. There is a guard standing there.

‘New armour,’ I tell him. ‘Where is your hardware department?’

‘Funny. Nobody told me to expect a delivery. Oh, well, I’ll let you set it up. Dr Peabody will probably arrange to place it tomorrow.’

He looks at me, all red in the puss, trying to drag Pallagyn along.

‘Funny it should be so weighty. I thought armour was light.’

‘This baby is wearing heavy underwear,’ I tell him. ‘How about giving me a hand?’

He helps lift Pallagyn and we carry him through a lot of halls into a big room.

There are a lot of suits of armour standing around the walls, and several are hanging on wires from the ceiling, but I see something else and let out a snort.

Sure enough, in the centre of the room is a glass case, and inside it is standing a little table just like the one I have under my arm.

I set the thing down and the guard notices it for the first time.

‘What you got here?’ he asks.

‘The armour is supposed to stand on it,’ I explain. ‘It comes with the set.’

‘Oh. Well, just stand it up against the wall. I got to get back to the door.’

And he goes away. I take a quick gander up and down and see the place is empty. It is getting dark and I figure it is closing time already.

‘Here we are,’ I whisper.

‘Hic,’ says Pallagyn.

He opens his visor and takes a look at the Tabouret.

‘Verily, it is that for which I seek,’ he whispers. ‘My thanks, a thousandfold.’

‘Forget it. Now all you got to do is wait till it gets a little darker, then make the snatch.’

I go up to the case and tap it.

‘Why,’ I say, ‘this is real luck. It opens from the back and you don’t even have to use the glass cutter.’

But Pallagyn is not paying any attention. He is looking around at the armour on the walls.

‘Gawain!’ he snorts.

‘What?’

‘’Tis the veritable armour of Sir Gawain!’ he yaps. ‘One of the Brotherhood of the Round Table.’

‘You don’t say!’

‘Aye—and yonder stands the coat of mail of Sir Sagramore! Indeed! I recognise the main of Eldeford, he that is cousin to Sir Kay. And Maligaint —’

He is rattling off the names of old friends, clanking around and tapping the tin, but it all looks like a bunch of spare parts in a hot car hide-out to me.

‘I am among friends,’ he chuckles.

‘Yeah? Don’t be too sure. If these museum babies ever find out what you’re up to, it’s goodbye quest. Now get to work, quick. I got to be going back.’ I push him over to the case. ‘I’ll watch the door for you in case anyone is coming,’ I whisper. ‘You switch the Tabourets. Snap to it.’

So I stand there, and Pallagyn makes for the case, trying not to clank too loud. It is dark and quiet, and creepy.

Pallagyn gets the case open in no time, but he has trouble in hauling out the Tabouret, because it has nails holding it down.

He is grunting and yanking on it and I am shaking because he is maybe going to rouse a guard.

‘I cannot say much for this guy Merlin,’ I comment. ‘He is supposed to help you knights over the hard spots, but I do not notice he has done you a good turn yet.’

‘Nay, I have thee to thank for my success,’ Pallagyn says. ‘For, lo, my quest is ended!’

And he rips the Tabouret loose and slides the other one in. Then he closes the glass again and marches over across the room.

Only right in the middle of it he lets out a squawk and falls down on the stone floor when his foot slips.

There is a loud crash like all hell is breaking loose.

It does.

Guys are yelling down the hall and I hear feet running this way. I get over to Pallagyn and help him up, but just as I am easing him onto his feet a squad of guards charges into the room and the heat is very much on.

‘Stop, thief!’ yells the guy in the lead, and the whole gang charges down on us. Pallagyn is trying to stand still again and I am yanking open a window, but when he sees them coming, Pal lets out a whoop and drops the Tabouret, waving his sword around.

‘Stand back ere I skewer thy livers!’ he howls. Then he turns to me. ‘Make haste, Sir Butch, and effect thy escape whilst I hold off yon varlets.’

‘Give me that,’ I say, grabbing at the sword. ‘I’ll hold them off and you get out of here and gallop back to your Merlin with the Bingo prize.’

‘There he is, men!’ yells a new voice. Coming through the door is none other than Old Whitey in person, and behind him are about eight cops. Then the cops are ahead of him, because they are coming for us, fast. A fat sergeant has his gun extremely out.

‘Pendragon and England!’ yells Pallagyn, patting the first cop on his bald spot with the flat side of his sword.

‘Hell and Damnation!’ bawls the sergeant. He lets go a slug, which bounces off Pallagyn’s helmet.

‘Superman!’ hollers another cop.

‘Get him, boys!’ screams Whitey.

It is a picnic without ants. I plant one on the sergeant’s neck, and Pal wades in with his sword. But the other six push us back into a corner, and the guards come up behind them. As fast as we knock them down, the others close in. They swarm over us like a gang of Airedales on a garbage heap.

‘Here we go,’ I gasp out, punching away.

‘Be of good ... uh ... heart!’ roars Pallagyn. He slices away. All at once he slips and the sword falls. And two coppers jump him before he can get up.

The sergeant gets his gun out again and points it at me.

‘Now then—’ he says. The boys grab us and push us forward.

All at once Pallagyn closes his eyes. ‘Merlin!’ he whispers. ‘Aid!’

Something very unusual happens here. The first thing I notice is a lot of clanking and scraping coming from the dark corners of the room.

And then there is more noise, like Pallagyn’s armour makes, only louder.

‘For Arthur and England!’ Pallagyn yells. ‘Gawain, Sagramore, Eldevord, Maligaint!—’

‘Aye, we come!’

Out of the dark crashes a half dozen suits of armour; but there are men in them now. It is the armour from the walls, and I see Pallagyn’s gang is here.

‘Merlin sends help!’ he grunts. And then he grabs his sword and wades in.

The others are whacking up the cops already, and there is a smashing of tinware. Some of the fuzz are running and the guards make for the door. As fast as they get there, the suits of armour hanging on the walls drop down on their necks and throw them.

In a minute it is all through.

Pallagyn stands in the centre of the room holding the Tabouret and all the guys in armour huddle around him.

‘The quest is over,’ he says. ‘Thanks to Merlin, and Sir Butch, here—’

But I am not here any more. I am sneaking out of the window, fast, because I have enough trouble and do not like to get mixed up in hocus-pocus or magicians’ unions. So I do not stay, but drop over the ledge.

Before I do so I think I see a flash of lightning or something, but cannot be sure. Anyway, I look around once more and see the museum room is empty.

There are a lot of cops lying on the floor and a lot of empty suits of armour are standing around, but there is nothing in them. I look for Pallagyn's suit and it is gone. So I blink my eyes and head for the truck, which I drive the hell away from there.

That is how it is, and I do a lot of thinking on my way home. Also the air helps to sober me up and I remember that I am practically drunk all the time since morning.

In fact, I am drunk since before I meet this Pallagyn if I ever do meet him and it is not my imagination.

Because when I look back in the museum I do not see him any more and I wonder if it is all something I dream up out of air and alcohol. It bothers me, and I know that whatever happens at the museum will not leak out in print, because cops are touchy about such matters and as far as they know nothing is missing.

Then I figure maybe Thin Tommy Malloon can tell me if I drop in, so on the way home I park the truck at his tavern and step inside.

Nobody is behind the bar but Bertram, and when he sees me he is very polite.

'I would like to speak with Thin Tommy,' I say.

Bertram gulps. 'He is upstairs lying down,' he says. 'In fact, he does not feel so well since you bop him in the belly this morning.'

'What do you mean I bop him?' I ask. 'My buddy does that.'

'You come in alone,' Bertram tells me. He gives me a long look, but there are customers in the joint so I just shrug and walk out.

So the rest of the way home I am up tight, because I figure either Bertram is lying to me or I am nuts. And right now I would just as soon be a little nuts as admit anything so screwy could happen.

Which is how it stands with me. I am sober, and I am done with chasing around for the day. If I lay off drinking shellac, I will not see any more

knights in armour with dopey stories about magicians and quests. I will let bygones be bygones and be a good boy.

That suits me, so I back the truck into the garage.

And then I get out and start cursing all over again.

All at once I know for sure whether or not it all happens.

Because standing there in the garage is that dizzy nag with the mask over the head that I have Sir Pallagyn put into the stable.

Do you know anybody who wants to buy a horse, cheap? It's only twelve hundred years old.

POOR LITTLE WARRIOR

Brian W. Aldiss

Like the previous story, 'Poor Little Warrior' is a fantasy about a quest, but in this case the quest is by a modern man for one of the giant creatures of prehistoric times, a brontosaurus. Although the theme of pursuing extinct creatures has been well explored in fantasy fiction since the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs and even earlier, the number which qualify as comedy are few and Brian Aldiss's contribution is arguably one of the very best—certainly it has been widely praised since its original publication in Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine in April 1958.

Brian Wilson Aldiss (1925—), who was born in Norfolk, was formerly a bookshop assistant and the literary editor of the Oxford Mail before his Science Fiction and fantasy stories such as Non-Stop (1958), Hothouse (1962), Greybeard (1964) and Brothers of the Head (1977) established him as one of the premier British writers in the genre. In all of these there were examples of his sense of humour and love of puns, but the first of his works to display his ability at comic fantasy was Primal Urge (1961), a vivid novel about sexual permissiveness which had a considerable influence on the publication of stories concerning sex in the SF magazines of the early Sixties. In Barefoot in the Head (1969) he dealt with drugs in a style compared to James Joyce, while Frankenstein Unbound (1973) was a fantasy involving time travel back to the period of Mary Shelley, to discover the real origins of her classic novel. A year later came The Eighty-Minute Hour: A Space Opera (1974), a rich comedy full of puns and extravagant inventions, and he followed this with two non-SF books which displayed even more ebulliently his wicked sense of humour: The Hand-Reared Boy (1970) and Soldier Erect (1971).

'Poor Little Warrior' may not be typical of Brian Aldiss's short fantasy fiction in general, but it is nevertheless a wonderfully comic tale without which this collection would be less than complete.

* * * *

Claude Ford knew exactly how it was to hunt a brontosaurus. You crawled heedlessly through the mud among the willows, through the little primitive flowers with petals as green and brown as a football field, through the beauty-lotion mud. You peered out at the creature sprawling among the reeds, its body as graceful as a sock full of sand. There it lay, letting the gravity cuddle it nappy-damp to the marsh, running its big rabbit-hole nostrils a foot above the grass in a sweeping semicircle, in a snoring search for more sausagy reeds. It was beautiful: here horror had reached its limits, come full circle and finally disappeared up its own sphincter. Its eyes gleamed with the liveliness of a week-dead corpse's big toe, and its compost breath and the fur in its crude aural cavities were particularly to be recommended to anyone who might otherwise have felt inclined to speak lovingly of the work of Mother Nature.

But as you, little mammal with opposed digit and .65 self-loading, semi-automatic, dual-barrelled, digitally-computed, telescopically sighted, rustless, high-powered rifle gripped in your otherwise-defenceless paws, slide along under the bygone willows, what primarily attracts you is the thunder lizard's hide. It gives off a smell as deeply resonant as the bass note of a piano. It makes the elephant's epidermis look like a sheet of crinkled lavatory paper. It is grey as the Viking seas, draught-deep as cathedral foundations. What contact possible to bone could allay the fever of that flesh? Over it scamper—you can see them from here!—the little brown lice that live in those grey walls and canyons, gay as ghosts, cruel as crabs. If one of them jumped on you, it would very like break your back. And when one of those parasites stops to cock its leg against one of the bronto's vertebrae, you can see it carries in its turn its own crop of easy-livers, each as big as a lobster, for you're near now, oh, so near that you can hear the monster's primitive heart-organ knocking, as the ventricle keeps miraculous time with the auricle.

Time for listening to the oracle is past: you're beyond the stage for omens, you're now headed in for the kill, yours or his; superstition has had its little day for today, from now on only this windy nerve of yours, this shaky conglomeration of muscle entangled untraceably beneath the sweat-shiny carapace of skin, this bloody little urge to slay the dragon, is going to answer all your orisons.

You could shoot now. Just wait till that tiny steam-shovel head pauses once again to gulp down a quarry-load of bulrushes, and with one inexpressibly vulgar bang you can show the whole indifferent Jurassic world that it's standing looking down the business end of evolution's sex-shooter. You know why you pause, even as you pretend not to know why you pause; that old worm conscience, long as a baseball pitch, long-lived as a tortoise, is at work; through every sense it slides, more monstrous than the serpent. Through the passions: saying here is a sitting duck, O Englishman! Through the intelligence: whispering that boredom, the kite-hawk who never feeds, will settle again when the task is done. Through the nerves: sneering that when the adrenalin currents cease to flow the vomiting begins. Through the maestro behind the retina: plausibly forcing the beauty of the view upon you.

Spare us that poor old slipper-slopper of a word, *beauty*; holy mum, is this a travelogue, nor are we out of it? *'Perched now on this titanic creature's back, we see a round dozen—and folks, let me stress that round—of gaudily plumaged birds, exhibiting between them all the colour you might expect to find on lovely, fabled Copacabana Beach. They're so round because they feed from the droppings that fall from the rich man's table. Watch this lovely shot now! See the bronto's tail lift. . . Oh, lovely, yep, a couple of hyrinkful at least emerging from his nether end. That sure was a beauty, folks, delivered straight from consumer to consumer. The birds are fighting over it now. Hey, you, there's enough to go round, and anyhow, you're round enough already . . . And nothing to do now but hop back up onto the old rump steak and wait for the next round. And now as the sun sinks in the Jurassic West, we say 'Fare well on that diet*

No, you're procrastinating, and that's a life work. Shoot the beast and put it out of your agony. Taking your courage in your hands, you raise it to shoulder level and squint down its sights. There is a terrible report; you are half stunned. Shakily, you look about you. The monster still munches, relieved to have broken enough wind to unbecalm the Ancient Mariner.

Angered (or is it some subtler emotion?), you now burst from the bushes and confront it, and this exposed condition is typical of the straits into which your consideration for yourself and others continually pitches you. Consideration? Or again something subtler? Why should you be confused just because you

come from a confused civilisation? But that's a point to deal with later, if there is a later, as these two hog-wallow eyes pupilling you all over from spitting distance tend to dispute. Let it not be by jaws alone, O monster, but also by huge hooves and, if convenient to yourself, by mountainous rollings upon me! Let death be a saga, sagacious, Beowulfate.

Quarter of a mile distant is the sound of a dozen hippos springing boisterously in gymslips from the ancestral mud, and next second a wallowing great tail as long as Sunday and as thick as Saturday night comes slicing over your head. You duck as duck you must, but the beast missed you anyway because it so happens that its coordination is no better than yours would be if you had to wave the Woolworth Building at a tarsier. This done, it seems to feel it has done its duty by itself. It forgets you. You just wish you could forget yourself as easily; that was, after all, the reason you had to come the long way here. *Get Away From It All*, said the time travel brochure, which meant for you getting away from Claude Ford, a husbandman as futile as his name with a terrible wife called Maude. Maude and Claude Ford. Who could not adjust to themselves, to each other, or to the world they were born in. It was the best reason in the as-it-is-at-present-constituted world for coming back here to shoot giant saurians—if you were fool enough to think that one hundred and fifty million years either way made an ounce of difference to the muddle of thoughts in a man's cerebral vortex.

You try to stop your silly, slobbering thoughts, but they have never really stopped since the cocacollaborating days of your growing up; God, if adolescence did not exist it would be unnecessary to invent it! Slightly, it steadies you to look again on the enormous bulk of this tyrant vegetarian into whose presence you charged with such a mixed death-life wish, charged with all the emotion the human orga(ni)sm is capable of. This time the bogeyman is real, Claude, just as you wanted it to be, and this time you really have to face up to it before it turns and faces you again. And so again you lift Ole Equaliser, waiting till you can spot the vulnerable spot.

The bright birds sway, the lice scamper like dogs, the marsh groans, as bronto sways over and sends his little cranium snaking down under the bile-bright water in a forage for roughage. You watch this; you have never been so jittery before in all your jittered life, and you are counting on this catharsis

wringing the last drop of acid fear out of your system for ever. OK, you keep saying to yourself insanely over and over, your million-dollar twenty-second-century education going for nothing, OK, OK. And as you say it for the umpteenth time, the crazy head comes back out of the water like a renegade express and gazes in your direction.

Grazes in your direction. For as the champing jaw with its big blunt molars like concrete posts works up and down, you see the swamp water course out over rimless lips, lipless rims, splashing your feet and sousing the ground. Reed and root, stalk and stem, leaf and loam, all are intermittently visible in that masticating maw and, struggling, straggling or tossed among them, minnows, tiny crustaceans, frogs—all destined in that awful, jawful movement to turn into bowel movement. And as the glump-glump-glumping takes place, above it the slime-resistant eyes again survey you.

These beasts live up to two hundred years, says the time travel brochure, and this beast has obviously tried to live up to that, for its gaze is centuries old, full of decades upon decades of wallowing in its heavyweight thoughtlessness until it has grown wise on twitterpatedness. For you it is like looking into a disturbing misty pool; it gives you a psychic shock, you fire off both barrels at your own reflection. Bang-bang, the dum-dums, big as paw-paws, go.

With no indecision, those century-old lights, dim and sacred, go out. These cloisters are closed till Judgement Day. Your reflection is torn and bloodied from them forever. Over their ravaged panes nictitating membranes slide slowly upwards, like dirty sheets covering a cadaver. The jaw continues to munch slowly, as slowly the head sinks down. Slowly, a squeeze of cold reptile blood toothpastes down the wrinkled flank of one cheek. Everything is slow, a creepy Secondary Era slowness like the drip of water, and you know that if you had been in charge of creation you would have found some medium less heart-breaking than Time to stage it all in.

Never mind! Quaff down your beakers, lords, Claude Ford has slain a harmless creature. Long live Claude the Clawed!

You watch breathless as the head touches the ground, the long laugh of neck touches the ground, the jaws close for good. You watch and wait for

something else to happen, but nothing ever does. Nothing ever would. You could stand here watching for an hundred and fifty million years, Lord Claude, and nothing would ever happen here again. Gradually your bronto's mighty carcass, picked loving clean by predators, would sink into the slime, carried by its own weight deeper; then the waters would rise, and old Conqueror Sea come in with the leisurely air of a cardsharp dealing the boys a bad hand. Silt and sediment would filter down over the mighty grave, a slow rain with centuries to rain in. Old bronto's bed might be raised up and then down again perhaps half a dozen times, gently enough not to disturb him, although by now the sedimentary rocks would be forming thick around him. Finally, when he was wrapped in a tomb finer than any Indian rajah ever boasted, the powers of the Earth would raise him high on their shoulders until, sleeping still, bronto would lie in a brow of the Rockies high above the waters of the Pacific. But little any of that would count with you, Claude the Sword; once the midget maggot of life is dead in the creature's skull, the rest is no concern of yours.

You have no emotion now. You are just faintly put out. You expected dramatic thrashing of the ground, or bellowing; on the other hand, you are glad the thing did not appear to suffer. You are like all cruel men, sentimental; you are like all sentimental men, squeamish. You tuck the gun under your arm and walk round the dinosaur to view your victory.

You prowl past the ungainly hooves, round the septic white of the cliff of belly, beyond the glistening and how-thought-provoking cavern of the cloaca, finally posing beneath the switch-back sweep of tail-to-rump. Now your disappointment is as crisp and obvious as a visiting card: the giant is not half as big as you thought it was. It is not one half as large, for example, as the image of you and Maude is in your mind. Poor little warrior, science will never invent anything to assist the titanic death you want in the contraterrene caverns of your fee-fi-fo fumblingly fearful id!

Nothing is left to you now but to slink back to your timemobile with a belly full of anticlimax. See, the bright dung-consuming birds have already cottoned on to the true state of affairs; one by one, they gather up their hunched wings and fly disconsolately off across the swamp to other hosts.

They know when a good thing turns bad, and do not wait for the vultures to drive them off; all hope abandon, ye who entrail here. You also turn away.

You turn, but you pause. Nothing is left but to go back, no, but 2181 ad is not just the home date; it is Maude. It is Claude. It is the whole awful, hopeless, endless business of trying to adjust to an overcomplex environment, of trying to turn yourself into a cog. Your escape from it into *the Grand Simplicities of the Jurassic*, to quote the brochure again, was only a partial escape, now over.

So you pause, and as you pause, something lands socko on your back, pitching you face forward into tasty mud. You struggle and scream as lobster claws tear at your neck and throat. You try to pick up the rifle but cannot, so in agony you roll over, and next second the crab-thing is greedying it on your chest. You wrench at its shell, but it giggles and pecks your fingers off. You forgot when you killed the bronto that its parasites would leave it, and that to a little shrimp like you they would be a deal more dangerous than their hosts.

You do your best, kicking for at least three minutes. By the end of that time there is a whole pack of the creatures on you. Already they are picking your carcass loving clean. You're going to like it up there on top of the Rockies; you won't feel a thing.

THE ODD OLD BIRD

Avram Davidson

If there is a make-believe world to rival Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork then it is the American writer Avram Davidson's Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania, where the Emperor's wizard, Dr Engelbert Eszterhazy, performs his heroic tasks. Davidson has been writing about this comic fantasy land since 1975 and his inventive imagination shows no sign of drying up. In an article, "The Inchoation of Eszterhazy", written in 1988, he explained that the inspiration for the series had come from the arcane symbols seen in the classic German movie, The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, which he had never been able to get out of his mind. 'Gradually it came to me that there had been an empire in Eastern Europe which had been so completely destroyed that we no longer even remembered it like the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary; that being an empire, it had an emperor; that the emperor had a wizard; the wizard drove about the streets of Bella (BELgrade/Vienna) in a steam runabout; that the emperor's name was Ignats Louis and the wizard's name was Engelbert Eszterhazy.'

The concept so fired Davidson's imagination that he wrote the first eight stories in just six weeks, developing an entire world of bizarre people, curious customs and extraordinary events that instantly grabbed the attention of fantasy readers. The success of Doctor Eszterhazy's exploits in succeeding stories has generated a fan club in the USA, a detailed map of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania by John Westfall, and the plaudits of SF writer John Clute, who has described Davidson as one of America's foremost contemporary writers of 'obtrusive literacy and wit'.

Avram Davidson (1923—) was born in New York and, according to his own account, 'educated in the local schools, a process which nearly unfitted me forever for participation in any useful functions whatsoever.' After serving with the US Navy in World War Two, he had a series of jobs, including sheep-herding, tomato-picking and inspecting fish-livers, before selling his first story, 'My Boy Friend's Name is Jello', to Fantasy and Science Fiction in 1954. Another story, 'Or All the Seas with Oysters', won him a Hugo

Award in 1958, and a string of collections in the following years established him as a uniquely comic voice in fantasy fiction.

‘The Odd Old Bird’ is one of the most recent Eszterhazy stories and was first published in the revived Weird Tales magazine Winter issue of 1988-9. Those encountering the allusive Doctor for the first time will probably need no further encouragement to seek out his other exploits once they have finished the next few pages. . .

* * * *

‘But *why* a canal?’

‘Cheaper, more, and better victuals.’

‘Oh.’

Prince Roldran Vlox (to cut his titles quite short, and never mind about his being a Von Stuart y Fitz-Guelf) had ‘just dropped in’ to talk to Doctor Engelbert Eszterhazy about the Proposed Canal connecting the Ister and the Danube...there were, in fact, several proposed canals and each one contained several sub-propositions: should it go right through the entirely Vlox-held Fens (‘The Mud,’ it was fondly called...‘Roldry Mud,’ the prince sometimes called himself)? should it go rather to the right or rather to the left? should it perhaps not go exactly ‘through’ them at all, but use their surplusage of waters for feeder systems? and—or—on the one hand This, on the other hand That—

‘What’s that new picture over on the wall, Engly?’ Guest asked suddenly. Host began to explain. ‘Ah,’ said Guest, ‘one of those funny French knick-knacks, eh? Always got some funny knick-knacks ... The British for sport, the French for fun...’ Still the guestly eyes considered the picture over on the wall. ‘That’s a damned funny picture...it’s all funny little speckles ...’

‘Why, Roldry, you are right. What good eyes you have.’

Promptly: ‘Don’t soil them by a lot of reading, is why. Lots of chaps want to know about a book, “Is it spicy?” Some want to know, “Is it got lots of

facts?" What *I* want to know is only, "Has it got big print?" Shan't risk spoiling my eyes and having to wear a monocle. One has to be a hunter, first, you know.' He made no further reference to the fact his host himself sometimes wore a monocle.

Eszterhazy returned to the matter of canals: 'Here is a sketch of a proposed catchment basin—Yes, Lemkotch?'

'Lord Grumpkin!' said the Day Porter.

There followed a rather short man of full figure, with a ruddy, shiny, cheerful face. There followed also a brief clarification, by Lemkotch's employer, of the proper way to refer to Professor Johanno Blumpkinn, the Imperial Geologist; there followed, also, an expression on the Porter's face, indicative of his being at all times Doctor (of Medicine, Law, Music, Philosophy, Science, and Letters) Eszterhazy's loyal and obedient servant and all them words were not for a ignorant fellow like him (the day porter) to make heads or tails of; after which he bowed his usual brief, stiff bob and withdrew. He left behind him a slight savour of rough rum, rough tobacco, rough manhood, and rough soap ... even if not quite enough rough soap to erase the savour of the others. The room also smelled of the unbleached beeswax with which they had been rubbing—polishing, if you like—the furniture's mahogany; of Prince Vlox, which some compared to that of a musty wolf (not perhaps to his face, though); of Eszterhazy himself (Pears soap and just a little bay rum) and of Professor Blumpkinn (Jenkinson's Gentleman's Cologne: more than just a little). Plus some Havana cigars supplied by the old firm of Freibourg and Treyer in the Haymarket—London was a long way from Bella, capital of the Triple Monarchy of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania (fourth largest empire in Europe) but so was Havana, for that matter. 'Gentlemen, you have met, I believe,' Eszterhazy said, anyway adding, 'Prince Vlox, Professor Blumpkinn.'

Further adding, 'I am sorry that my servant did not get your name right, Han.'

Blumpkinn waved his hand. 'Calling me by the old-fashioned word for the smallest coin in his native province really helps me to remember a proper value of my own worth.—Ah. *Canal* plans. I hope that when the excavations are in progress you will be sure to keep me in mind if any interesting fossils

turn up.’ It was not sure that Prince Vlox would be able to identify an interesting fossil if one hit him in the hough or bit him on the buttock, but Eszterhazy gave a serious nod. *He* knew how such things were to be done. Offer a small gift for reporting the discovery of ‘any of them funny elf-stone things as the old witch-women used to use’—they used to use them for anything from dropped stomach to teaching a damned good lesson to husbands with wandering eyes: but now all that had gone out of fashion—should certainly result in the reporting of enough interesting fossils, uninteresting fossils, and, indeed, non-fossils, to provide coping-stones for the entire length of the Proposed Canal ... if ever there was actually a canal...

‘And speaking of which,’ said Blumpkinn, and took two large sheets out between covers large enough to have contained the Elephant Folios; ‘I have brought you, Doctor ‘Bert, as I had promised, the proof-sheets of the new photo-zinc impressions of the *Archaeopteryx*, showing far greater detail than was previously available...you see...’

Doctor ‘Bert did indeed now thrust in his monocle and scanned the sheets, said that he saw. Prince Vlox glanced, glanced away, rested a more interested glance at the funny French knick-knack picture...men, women, water, grass, children, women, women ... all indeed composed of multitudes of tiny dots, speckles...points, if you liked ... a matter easily noticeable if you were up close, or had a hunter’s eye.

‘Yes, here are the independent fingers and claws, the separate and unfused metacarpals, the un-birdlike caudal appendage, all the ribs non-unciate and thin, neither birdlike nor very reptilian, the thin coracoid, the centra free as far as the sacrum, and the very long tail...’ His voice quite died away to a murmur, Professor Blumpkinn, perhaps thinking that it was not polite to lose the attention of the other guest, said, ‘This, you see, Prince Vlox, is the famous *Archaeopteryx*, hundreds of millions of years old, which the sensational press has rather inadequately described as the so-called ‘no-longer-missing-link’ between reptiles and birds...observe the sharp teeth and the feather...this other one unfortunately has no head...and this one—’

Here Prince Vlox, perhaps not an omnivorous student of palaeontology, said, ‘Yes. Seen it.’

‘*Ah* ... was that in London? or Berlin?’

‘Never been in either place.’

Blumpkinn gaped. Recovered himself. Looked, first amused, then sarcastic, then polite. Eszterhazy slowly looked up. ‘What do you mean, then, Roldry. “Seen it”? What—?’

Prince Vlox repeated, with a slight emphasis, that he had *seen* it. And he bulged his eyes and stared, as though to emphasise the full meaning of the verb, *to see*.

‘What do you—Ah...“Seen it,” seen it when, seen it where?’

‘On our land. Forget just when. What do you mean, “Am I sure?” *I* don’t need a monocle to look at things. Why shouldn’t I be sure? What about it?’

Blumpkinn and Eszterhazy for a moment spoke simultaneously. What about it? There were only two known *Archaeopteryx* specimens in the world! one in London, one in Berlin—think what a third would mean! Not only for science, but for Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania and its prestige.

Vlox, with something like a sigh, rose to his feet; clearly the subject no longer much engaged him ... possibly because his own family and its prestige was incomparably older than the Triple Monarchy and its prestige. ‘Well, I’ll have it looked for, then. Must be off. Things to do. My wine-merchant. My gunsmith. My carriage-maker. A turn of cards at The Hell-Hole. See if they’ve finished re-upholstering my railroad car. Tobacconist...new powder scales...Can I execute any commissions for you, as they say? Haw haw! Tell you what, Engly, damned if I know what you want with this odd old bird, but tell you what: trade it for that funny French painting.’ And he donned his tattered seal-skin cap (so that he should not be struck by lightning) and his wisent-skin cape (also fairly tattered, but wisents weren’t easy to get any more), picked up his oak-stick, nodded his Roldry-nod, neither languid nor brisk, and went out into Little Turkling Street, where his carriage (as they say) awaited him. Some backwoods nobles kept a pied-à-terre in Bella in the form of a house or apartment, Prince Roldran preferred to keep a stable and to sleep in the loft. With taste and scent, no argument.

Silence for some seconds. Such was the prince's presence, that his immediate absence left a perceptible hole.

Blumpkinn: What do you say, Doctor 'Bert, is the prince *quite*, [a hesitation] ...dependable?

Eszterhazy [removing his monocle]: In some things, instantly. He would think nothing of striking a rabid wolf with bare hands to save you. In others? well ... let us say that fossils are not quite in his line. We shall see. Any kind of fossils from out that way should be interesting. If the old witch-women have left any.

The Imperial Geologist blinked. 'Yes ... if they've left any—Though I suppose...imagine, Doctor, they used to grind up dinosaur bones and feed them with bread and oil to pregnant women!!'

'That's what they did to my own dear Mother. Well, why not? Calcium, you know.'

The Imperial Geologist (the King-Emperor, Ignats Louis, in authorising the position, had hoped for gold and, no gold being found, had shrugged and gone out to inspect the new infantry boots)—the Imperial Geologist blinked some more. 'Yes,' he said. 'Well, why not. Calcium ... I know.'

Some years before there had appeared the book *From Ram's Head to Sandy Cape on Camelback, by a New Chum* (Glasscocke and Gromthorpe, No. 3, the Minories, 12/-), and Eszterhazy had translated it into Modern Gothic, as he had its successors, *Up the Fly River by Sail and Paddle*, and *In Pursuit of Poundmaker*, plus a *General Survey of the Northwest Territories* (available at Szentbelessel's Book House near the New Model Road at two ducats *per* or all three for five ducats, each with eleven half-tone illustrations and a free patriotic bookmark; write for catalogue). From these translations a friendship had developed. Newton Charles Enderson was not really a 'new chum,' far from it: he was a 'currency lad'; and now he was on holiday from the University of Eastern Australia and hoped to explore some more, in the lands of the Triple Monarchy.

There were a number of not-very-well explored (not very well explored by any scientific expeditions, that is; they had all been very well explored by the River Tartars, the Romanou, and by all the other non-record-keeping peoples who had gone that way since the days of (and before the days of: caches of amber had been found there, and Grecian pottery) the Getae, who may or may not have been close of kin to the ancient Scythian Goths) and rather languid waterways disemboguing into the Delta of the Ister. And New Chum Enderson had wanted Eszterhazy to go exploring with him, in a pirogue. And Eszterhazy had very much wanted to do so. There were several sorts of bee-eaters which had never been well engraved, let alone photographed; skins of course were in the museums, and several water-colours had been made by someone whose identity had been given simply as *An Englishwoman*, long ago; still semi-impenetrably wrapped in her modesty, she had withdrawn into her native northern mists, leaving only copies of the water-colours behind.

‘But I am afraid that our schedules don’t match. Really I do regret.’

New Chum regretted, too. ‘But I must be back for the start of term.’

‘And I for the meeting of the Proposed Canal Committee. Well ... I know that your movements are as precisely dated as those of Phileas Fogg, so just let me know when you’ll be back, and I’ll give you a good luncheon to make up for your privations. There’s a person in the country who’s promised me a fine fat pullet, and the truffles should be good, too, so—’

New Chum gave a bark, intended for a laugh, of a sort which had terrified Pommies and Aboes alike. ‘I’m not one of your European gourmets,’ he said. ‘Grew up on damper and ‘roo. Advanced to mutton, pumpkin, and suet pud. More than once ate cockatoo—they’d told me it was chook—”chicken” to you—and I never knew the difference. Still, of course, I’ll be glad to eat what you give me, with no complaint...Ah, by the way. Don’t depend on me much or at all to identify and bring back your bee-eaters. Know *nothing* of ornithology. Officially I’m Professor of Political Economy, but what I am, actually, is an explorer. Glad to give you a set of my notes, though.’ And on this they parted.

Two pieces of news. The country pullet would be on hand the next day. Also alas the sister-in-law’s sister of Frow Widow Orgats, housekeeper and cook,

had been Taken Bad with the Dropped Stomach—did she require medical advice?—an elf-stone?—no: she required the attentions of her sister's sister-in-law. The house, with the help of its lower staff, might keep itself for a little while. 'And Malta, who I've hand-picked meself, will cook for you very well till I gets back, Sir Doctor.' Malta, thought the Sir Doctor, had perhaps been handpicked so as to prevent the Sir Doctor from thinking of her as a suitable full-time replacement—she was not perhaps very bright— but merely he said, 'Tomorrow they are bringing up a special pullet for the luncheon with the foreign guest and it may not look just exactly as the sort they sell here at the Hen Mark in town; so mind you do it justice.'

Malta dropped several curtseys, but not, thank God, her stomach; said, 'Holy Angels, my Lard, whatsoe'er I'm given to cook, I shall cook it fine, for Missus she's wrote out the words for me real big on a nice piece of pasteboard.' Malta could read and she had the recipe? Well, well. Hope for the best. New Chum would perhaps not mind or even notice if the luncheon fell short of standard, but Eszterhazy, after all, would have to eat it, too.

However.

The roof of the Great Chamber did not indeed fall in on the meeting of the Proposed Canal Committee, but many other things happened, which he would hope had rather not. The chairman had forgotten the minutes of the last meeting and would not hear of the reading being skipped, *pro hac vice*, so all had to wait until they had been fetched in a slow hack, if not indeed a tumbril or an ox-cart. Then the Conservative delegation had wished to be given assurances the most profound that any land taken for the Canal would be paid for at full current market value; next, well before the Conservoes were made satisfied with such assurances, the Workingchaps' delegation had taken it into its collective head that Asian coolie labour might be employed in Canal construction and demanded positive guarantees that it would not. Then the Commercial representation desired similar soothing in regard to brick and building-stone—not only that it would not be imported from Asia, but from anywhere else outside the Empire—'Even if it has to come from Pannonia!'—something which the Pannonian delegation somehow took much amiss. Cries of *Point of order!* and *Treason!* and *What has the Committee got to hide?* and *Move the previous question!* were incessant. And

Eszterhazy realised that he was absolutely certain to miss anyway most of his luncheon engagement with Enderson.

So he sent word that the meal was to proceed without him, and his apologies to his guest, and he (Eszterhazy) would join him as soon as possible.

‘As soon as’ was eventually reached, though he had feared it wouldn’t be. As he was making his way out of the Great Chamber he encountered Professor Blumpkinn, almost in tears. ‘I have missed my luncheon!’ said the Imperial Geologist (he did not look as though he had missed many) dolefully. ‘They have prepared none for me at home, and in a restaurant I cannot eat, because my stomach is delicate: if anything is in the least greasy or underdone or overdone, one feels rising, then, the bile: and one is dyspeptic for days!’

‘Come home with me, then, Johanno,’ said Eszterhazy.

‘Gladly!’

One might ask, How far can a pullet go? but the pullet was after all intended merely as garnish to only one course of several; also a cook in Bella would sooner have suffered herself to be trampled by elephant cows rather than fail to provide a few Back-up Entrances, as they were called, in case of emergencies. A singularly greedy guest might become an Untoward Incident in a foreign *pension*: but not in a well-ordered house in Bella: What a compliment! God—who gives appetite—bless the man! and the order would be passed on, via an agreed-upon signal, to bring out one of the back-ups.

Going past the porte-cochère of the Great Hall, which was jammed with vehicles, Eszterhazy held up his hand and the red steam runabout darted forward from a nearby passage; almost before it had come to a stop, Schwebel, the engineer, had vaulted into the back to stoke the anthracite: Eszterhazy took the tiller. His guest, an appreciative sniff for the cedar wood-work (beeswax ‘compliments of prince Vlox’), sat beside him.

‘Who’s *that*?’ asked an Usher of a Doorkeeper, watching the deft work with the steering-gear.

‘He’*m* Doctors Eszterhazy, th’ Emperor’s wizard,’ said Doorkeeper to Usher.

‘So *that’s* him!—odd old bird!’ And then they both had to jump as the delegations poured out, demanding their coaches, carriages, curricles, hacks, and troikas. None, however, demanded steam runabouts.

‘It will not offend you if we enter by way of the kitchen?’ the doctor (although his doctorate was plural, he himself was singular...very singular) asked the professor.

Who answered that they might enter by way of the chimney. ‘Cannot you hear my stomach growling? Besides, it is always a pleasure to visit a well-ordered kitchen.’ Blumpkinn rang with pleasure the hand-bell given him to warn passers-by—the steamer was almost noiseless—and drivers of nervous horses.

‘A moderate number of unannounced visits help keep a kitchen well-ordered.’ Besides, with a temporary cook and a guest with a very delicate stomach, an inspection, however brief, might be a good idea: and, in a few minutes, there they were!—but what was this in the alley? a heavy country wagon—and at the door, someone whose canvas coat was speckled with feathers—someone stamping his feet and looking baffled. ‘I tells you again that Poulterer Puckelhaube has told me to bring this country-fed bird, and to git a skilling and a half for it! ‘Tain’t my fault as I’m late: the roads about the Great Chamber was filled with kerritches.’

But, like the King of Iceland’s oldest son, Malta Cook was having none. ‘You’s heard I’m only temporal here,’ she said, hands on hips, ‘and thinks to try your gammon on me!—but you’ll get no skilling and a half at this door! The country chicking has already been delivered couple hours ago, with the other firm’s compliments, and the foreign guest is eating of it now. Away with ye, and—’ She caught sight of Eszterhazy, curtsied, gestured towards the deliveryman, her mouth open for explanation and argument.

She was allowed no time. Eszterhazy said, ‘Take the bird and pay for it, we’ll settle the matter later.—Give him a glass of ale,’ he called over his

shoulder. Instantly the man's grievance vanished. The money would, after all, go to his employer. But the beer was his ... at least for a while.

At the table, napkin tucked into his open collar, sunburned and evidently quite content, sat Newton Charles ('New Chum') Enderson, calmly chewing. Equally calmly, he returned the just-cleaned-off bone to its platter, on which (or, if you prefer, whereon) he had neatly laid out the skeleton. Perhaps he had always done the same, even with the cockatoo and the kangaroo. Eszterhazy stared in intense disbelief. Blumpkinn's mouth was opening and closing like that of a barbel, or a carp. 'Welcome aboard,' said New Chum, looking up. 'Sorry you've missed it. The journey has given me quite an appetite.' At the end of the platter was a single, and slightly odd, feather. Malta had perhaps heard, if not more, of how to serve a pheasant.

'My God!' cried Blumpkinn. 'Look! There is the centra free as far as the sacrum, and the very long tail as well as the thin coracoid, all the ribs non-unciate and thin, neither birdlike nor very reptilian, the un-birdlike caudal appendage, the separate and unfused metacarpals, the independent fingers and claws.'

'Not bad at all,' said Enderson, touching the napkin to his lips. 'As I've told you, I don't know one bird from another, but this is not bad. Rather like bamboo chicken—goanna, or iguana, you would call it. Though a bit far north for that...but of course it must be imported! My compliments to the chef! By the way, I understand that the man who brought it said that there weren't any more . . . whatever that means...You know how to treat a guest well, I must say!'

Contentedly, he broke off a bit of bread and sopped at the truffled gravy. Then he looked up again. 'Oh, and speaking of compliments,' he said, 'who's Prince Vlox?'

'I see the French picture is missing,' said Eszterhazy.

ASTRONAUTS AND ALIENS

Space Opera Yarns



YOUNG ZAPHOD PLAYS IT SAFE

Douglas Adams

The third category of humorous fantasy features the Space Opera: stories of unlikely alien worlds and hilarious exploits in outer space. Like the two previous categories it has a lengthy history and a current star author, Douglas Adams, the creator of a series he calls 'the increasingly inaccurately named Hitch-Hiker trilogy'. What began as a BBC Radio 4 programme with the title The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy has become a phenomenal success in books and on TV, which shows no signs of diminishing.

The original radio series was broadcast during March and April 1978, and told the story of Ford Prefect, a researcher for the standard reference guide to the universe, travelling with his bemused friend Arthur Dent and meeting all manner of weird aliens, including the unforgettable two-headed con-man, Zaphod Beeblebrox. Afterwards Adams adapted this into a best-selling novel which was published in 1979. It has been followed by The Restaurant at the End of the Universe (1980), Life, the Universe and Everything (1982), So Long, and Thanks for all the Fish (1984) and Mostly Harmless (1992). These books in turn have inspired a Hitch-Hiker cult and generated a variety of souvenirs—records, T-shirts and pens—not to mention a TV series, several comic book versions and the possibility of a major film.

Douglas Adams (1952—) was born in Cambridge, and it was while he was reading English at the University that he began to develop his comic talent by writing material for the famous Footlights Review. After graduating he spent several years contributing material to radio and television, as well as writing, performing and sometimes directing stage reviews in London, Cambridge and on the Edinburgh Fringe. He was also, he says, 'at various times a hospital porter, barn builder, chicken shed cleaner, bodyguard, radio producer and the scripteditor of Doctor Who.' The idea for Hitch-Hiker, he says, came to him while hitching around Europe with a copy of The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to Europe in his rucksack. One night, staring up at the heavens, he realised that a story about 'inter-galactic thumbing' could

provide the basis for a new kind of SF. He then began work on the pilot radio script which was initially to be called The Ends of the Earth. Despite a total lack of publicity, it quickly built up a loyal following and a legend had been born. In 1981 the story was televised and again broke new ground by being the first British TV series to be filmed with stereo sound and by using computer graphics to accompany the Guide entries read by Peter Jones. Critics greeted it as 'the first inter-galactic multi-media epic'.

To date Douglas Adams has only written one Hitch-Hiker short story, 'Yang Zaphod Plays It Safe', which he describes as 'an early episode in the life of Zaphod Beeblebrox which offers another clue as to why the Earth was/will be destroyed'. For this book he has specially revised the original 1986 version of the tale which, by its reappearance, adds another dimension to the Guide's extraordinary success story...

* * * *

A large flying craft moved swiftly across the surface of an astoundingly beautiful sea. From mid-morning onwards it plied back and forth in great widening arcs, and at last attracted the attention of the local islanders, a peaceful, sea-food loving people who gathered on the beach and squinted up into the blinding sun, trying to see what was there.

Any sophisticated, knowledgeable person, who had knocked about, seen a few things, would probably have remarked on how much the craft looked like a filing cabinet—a large and recently burgled filing cabinet lying on its back with its drawers in the air and flying.

The islanders, whose experience was of a different kind, were instead stuck by how little it looked like a lobster.

They chattered excitedly about its total lack of claws, its stiff unbendy back, and the fact that it seemed to experience the greatest difficulty staying on the ground. This last feature seemed particularly funny to them. They jumped up and down on the spot a lot to demonstrate to the stupid thing that they themselves found staying on the ground the easiest thing in the world.

But soon this entertainment began to pall for them. After all, since it was perfectly clear to them that the thing was not a lobster, and since their world was blessed with an abundance of things that were lobsters (a good half a dozen of which were now marching succulently up the beach towards them) they saw no reason to waste any more time on the thing but decided instead to adjourn immediately for a late lobster lunch.

At that exact moment the craft stopped suddenly in mid-air then upended itself and plunged headlong into the ocean with a great crash of spray which sent them shouting into the trees.

When they re-emerged, nervously, a few minutes later, all they were able to see was a smoothly scarred circle of water and a few gulping bubbles.

That's odd, they said to each other between mouthfuls of the best lobster to be had anywhere in the Western Galaxy, that's the second time that's happened in a year.

The craft which wasn't a lobster dived direct to a depth of two hundred feet, and hung there in the heavy blueness, while vast masses of water swayed about it. High above, where the water was magically clear, a brilliant formation of fish flashed away. Below, where the light had difficulty reaching, the colour of the water sank to a dark and savage blue.

Here, at two hundred feet, the sun streamed feebly. A large, silk-skinned sea-mammal rolled idly by, inspecting the craft with a kind of half-interest, as if it had half expected to find something of this kind round about here, and then it slid on up and away towards the rippling light.

The craft waited here for a minute or two, taking readings, and then descended another hundred feet. At this depth it was becoming seriously dark. After a moment or two the internal lights of the craft shut down, and in the second or so that passed before the main external beams suddenly stabbed out, the only visible light came from a small hazily illuminated pink sign which read The Beeblebrox Salvage and Really Wild Stuff Corporation.

The huge beams switched downwards, catching a vast shoal of silver fish, which swivelled away in silent panic.

In the dim control room which extended in a broad bow from the craft's blunt prow, four heads were gathered round a computer display that was analysing the very, very faint and intermittent signals that emanated from deep on the sea bed.

‘That’s it,’ said the owner of one of the heads finally.

‘Can we be quite sure?’ said the owner of another of the heads.

‘One hundred per cent positive,’ replied the owner of the first head.

‘You’re one hundred per cent positive that the ship which is crashed on the bottom of this ocean is the ship which you said you were one hundred per cent positive could one hundred per cent positively never crash?’ said the owner of the two remaining heads. ‘Hey,’ he put up two of his hands, ‘I’m only asking.’

The two officials from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration responded to this with a very cold stare, but the man with the odd, or rather the even number of heads, missed it. He flung himself back on the pilot couch, opened a couple of beers—one for himself and the other also for himself—stuck his feet on the console and said ‘Hey, baby’ through the ultra-glass at a passing fish.

‘Mr Beeblebrox...’ began the shorter and less reassuring of the two officials in a low voice.

‘Yup?’ said Zaphod, rapping a suddenly empty can down on some of the more sensitive instruments, ‘you ready to dive? Let’s go.’

‘Mr Beeblebrox, let us make one thing perfectly clear ...’

‘Yeah let’s,’ said Zaphod. ‘How about this for a start? Why don’t you just tell me what’s really on this ship?’

‘We have told you,’ said the official. ‘By-products.’

Zaphod exchanged weary glances with himself.

‘By-products,’ he said. ‘By-products of what?’

‘Processes,’ said the official.

‘What processes?’

‘Processes that are perfectly safe.’

‘Santa Zarquana Voostra!’ exclaimed both of Zaphod’s heads in chorus, ‘so safe that you have to build a zarking fortress ship to take the by-products to the nearest black hole and tip them in! Only it doesn’t get there because the pilot does a detour—is this right?—to pick up some lobster ... ? OK, so the guy is cool, but ... I mean own up, this is barking time, this is major lunch, this is stool approaching critical mass, this is ... this is ... total vocabulary failure!’

‘Shut up!’ his right head yelled at his left, ‘we’re flanging!’

He got a good calming grip on the remaining beer can.

‘Listen guys,’ he resumed after a moment’s peace and contemplation. The two officials had said nothing. Conversation at this level was not something to which they felt they could aspire. ‘I just want to know,’ insisted Zaphod, ‘what you’re getting me into here.’

He stabbed a finger at the intermittent readings trickling over the computer screen. They meant nothing to him but he didn’t like the look of them at all. They were all squiggly with lots of long numbers and things.

‘It’s breaking up, is that it?’ he shouted. ‘It’s got a hold full of epsilonic radiating aorist rods or something that’ll fry this whole space sector for zillions of years back and it’s breaking up. Is that the story? Is that what we’re going down to find? Am I going to come out of that wreck with even more heads?’

‘It cannot possibly be a wreck, Mr Beeblebrox,’ insisted the official, ‘the ship is guaranteed to be perfectly safe. It cannot possibly break up.’

‘Then why are you so keen to go and look at it?’

‘We like to look at things that are perfectly safe.’

‘Freeeeooow!’

‘Mr Beeblebrox,’ said one official, patiently, ‘may I remind you that you have a job to do?’

‘Yeah, well maybe I don’t feel so keen on doing it all of a sudden. What do you think I am, completely without any moral whatsits, what are they called, those moral things?’

‘Scruples?’

‘Scruples, thank you, whatsoever? Well?’

The two officials waited calmly. They coughed slightly to help pass the time. Zaphod sighed a ‘what is the world coming to’ sort of sigh to absolve himself from all blame, and swung himself round in his seat.

‘Ship?’ he called.

‘Yup?’ said the ship.

‘Do what I do.’

The ship thought about this for a few milliseconds and then, after double checking all the seals on its heavy duty bulkheads, it began slowly, inexorably, in the hazy blaze of its lights, to sink to the lowest depths.

Five hundred feet.

A thousand.

Two thousand.

Here, at a pressure of nearly seventy atmospheres, in the chilling depths where no light reaches, nature keeps its most heated imaginings. Two-foot long nightmares loomed wildly into the bleaching light, yawned, and vanished back into the blackness.

Two and a half thousand feet.

At the dim edges of the ship's lights guilty secrets flitted by with their eyes on stalks.

Gradually the topography of the distantly approaching ocean bed resolved with greater and greater clarity on the computer displays until at last a shape could be made out that was separate and distinct from its surroundings. It was like a huge lopsided cylindrical fortress which widened sharply halfway along its length to accommodate the heavy ultra-plating with which the crucial storage holds were clad, and which were supposed by its builders to have made this the most secure and impregnable spaceship ever built. Before launch the material structure of this section had been battered, rammed, blasted and subjected to every assault its builders knew it could withstand in order to demonstrate that it could withstand them.

The tense silence in the cockpit tightened perceptibly as it became clear that it was this section that had broken rather neatly in two.

'In fact it's perfectly safe,' said one of the officials, 'it's built so that even if the ship does break up, the storage holds cannot possibly be breached.'

Three thousand, eight hundred and twenty-five feet.

Four Hi-Presh-A SmartSuits moved slowly out of the open hatchway of the salvage craft and waded through the barrage of its lights towards the monstrous shape that loomed darkly out of the sea night. They moved with a sort of clumsy grace, near weightless though weighed on by a world of water.

With his right-hand head Zaphod peered up into the black immensities above him and for a moment his mind sang with a silent roar of horror. He glanced to his left and was relieved to see that his other head was busy watching the Brockian Ultra-Cricket broadcasts on the helmet vid without concern. Slightly behind him to his left walked the two officials from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration, slightly in front of him to his right walked the empty suit, carrying their implements and testing the way for them.

They passed the huge rift in the broken-backed Starship Billion Year Bunker, and played their flashlights up into it. Mangled machinery loomed between torn and twisted bulkheads, two feet thick. A family of large transparent eels lived in there now and seemed to like it.

The empty suit preceded them along the length of the ship's gigantic murky hull, trying the airlocks. The third one it tested ground open uneasily. They crowded inside it and waited for several long minutes while the pump mechanisms dealt with the hideous pressure that the ocean exerted, and slowly replaced it with an equally hideous pressure of air and inert gases. At last the inner door slid open and they were admitted to a dark outer holding area of the Starship Billion Year Bunker. Several more high security Titan-O-Hold doors had to be passed through, each of which the officials opened with a selection of quark keys. Soon they were so deep within the heavy security fields that the Ultra-Cricket broadcasts were beginning to fade, and Zaphod had to switch to one of the rock video stations, since there was nowhere that they were not able to reach.

A final doorway slid open, and they emerged into a large sepulchral space. Zaphod played his flashlight against the opposite wall and it fell full on a wild-eyed screaming face.

Zaphod screamed a diminished fifth himself, dropped his light and sat heavily on the floor, or rather on a body which had been lying there undisturbed for around six months and which reacted to being sat on by exploding with great violence. Zaphod wondered what to do about all this, and after a brief but hectic internal debate decided that passing out would be the very thing.

He came to a few minutes later and pretended not to know who he was, where he was or how he had got there, but was not able to convince anybody. He then pretended that his memory suddenly returned with a rush and that the shock caused him to pass out again, but he was helped unwillingly to his feet by the empty suit—which he was beginning to take a serious dislike to—and forced to come to terms with his surroundings.

They were dimly and fitfully lit and unpleasant in a number of respects, the most obvious of which was the colourful arrangement of parts of the ship's

late lamented Navigation Officer over the floor, walls and ceiling, and especially over the lower half of his, Zaphod's, suit. The effect of this was so astoundingly nasty that we shall not be referring to it again at any point in this narrative—other than to record briefly the fact that it caused Zaphod to throw up inside his suit, which he therefore removed and swapped, after suitable headgear modifications, with the empty one. Unfortunately the stench of the fetid air in the ship, followed by the sight of his own suit walking around casually draped in rotting intestines, was enough to make him throw up in the other suit as well, which was a problem that he and the suit would simply have to live with.

There. All done. No more nastiness.

At least, no more of that particular nastiness.

The owner of the screaming face had calmed down very slightly now and was bubbling away incoherently in a large tank of yellow liquid—an emergency suspension tank.

‘It was crazy,’ he babbled, ‘crazy! I told him we could always try the lobster on the way back, but he was crazy. Obsessed! Do you ever get like that about lobster? Because I don’t. Seems to me it’s all rubbery and fiddly to eat, and not that much taste, well I mean is there? I infinitely prefer scallops, and said so. Oh Zarquon, I said so!’

Zaphod stared at this extraordinary apparition, flailing in its tank. The man was attached to all kinds of life-support tubes, and his voice was bubbling out of speakers that echoed insanely round the ship, returning as haunting echoes from deep and distant corridors.

‘That was where I went wrong,’ the madman yelled, ‘I actually said that I preferred scallops and he said it was because I hadn’t had real lobster like they did where his ancestors came from, which was here, and he’d prove it. He said it was no problem, he said the lobster here was worth a whole journey, let alone the small diversion it would take to get here, and he swore he could handle the ship in the atmosphere, but it was madness, madness!’ he screamed, and paused with his eyes rolling, as if the word had rung some kind of bell in his mind. ‘The ship went right out of control! I couldn’t

believe what we were doing and just to prove a point about lobster which is really so overrated as a food, I'm sorry to go on about lobsters so much, I'll try and stop in a minute, but they've been on my mind so much for the months I've been in this tank, can you imagine what it's like to be stuck in a ship with the same guys for months eating junk food when all one guy will talk about is lobster and then spend six months floating by yourself in a tank thinking about it. I promise I will try and shut up about the lobsters, I really will. Lobsters, lobsters, lobsters—enough! I think I'm the only survivor. I'm the only one who managed to get to an emergency tank before we went down. I sent out the Mayday and then we hit. It's a disaster isn't it? A total disaster, and all because the guy liked lobsters. How much sense am I making? It's really hard for me to tell.'

He gazed at them beseechingly, and his mind seemed to sway slowly back down to earth like a falling leaf. He blinked and looked at them oddly like a monkey peering at a strange fish. He scrabbled curiously with his wrinkled up fingers at the glass side of the tank. Tiny, thick yellow bubbles loosed themselves from his mouth and nose, caught briefly in his swab of hair and strayed on upwards.

'Oh Zarquon, oh heavens,' he mumbled pathetically to himself, 'I've been found. I've been rescued...'

'Well,' said one of the officials, briskly, 'you've been found at least.' He strode over to the main computer bank in the middle of the chamber and started checking quickly through the ship's main monitor circuits for damage reports.

'The aorist rod chambers are intact,' he said.

'Holy dingo's dos,' snarled Zaphod, 'there are aorist rods on board...!'

Aorist rods were devices used in a now happily abandoned form of energy production. When the hunt for new sources of energy had at one point got particularly frantic, one bright young chap suddenly spotted that one place which had never used up all its available energy was—the past. And with the sudden rush of blood to the head that such insights tend to induce, he invented a way of mining it that very same night, and within a year huge tracts of the

past were being drained of all their energy and simply wasting away. Those who claimed that the past should be left unspoilt were accused of indulging in an extremely expensive form of sentimentality. The past provided a very cheap, plentiful and clean source of energy, there could always be a few Natural Past Reserves set up if anyone wanted to pay for their upkeep, and as for the claim that draining the past impoverished the present, well, maybe it did, slightly, but the effects were immeasurable and you really had to keep a sense of proportion.

It was only when it was realised that the present really was being impoverished, and that the reason for it was that those selfish plundering wastrel bastards up in the future were doing exactly the same thing, that everyone realised that every single aorist rod, and the terrible secret of how they were made, would have to be utterly and forever destroyed. They claimed it was for the sake of their grandparents and grandchildren, but it was of course for the sake of their grandparents' grandchildren, and their grandchildren's grandparents.

The official from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration gave a dismissive shrug.

'They're perfectly safe,' he said. He glanced up at Zaphod and suddenly said with uncharacteristic frankness, 'There's worse than that on board. At least,' he added, tapping at one of the computer screens, 'I hope it's on board.'

The other official rounded on him sharply.

'What the hell do you think you're saying?' he snapped.

The first shrugged again. He said, 'It doesn't matter. He can say what he likes. No one would believe him. It's why we chose to use him rather than do anything official, isn't it? The more wild the story he tells, the more it'll sound like he's some hippy adventurer making it up. He can even say that we said this and it'll make him sound like a paranoid.' He smiled pleasantly at Zaphod who was seething in a suit full of sick. 'You may accompany us,' he told him, 'if you wish.'

‘You see?’ said the official, examining the ultra-titanium outer seals of the aorist rod hold. ‘Perfectly secure, perfectly safe.’

He said the same thing as they passed holds containing chemical weapons so powerful that a teaspoonful could fatally infect an entire planet.

He said the same thing as they passed holds containing zeta-active compounds so powerful that a teaspoonful could blow up a whole planet.

He said the same thing as they passed holds containing theta-active compounds so powerful that a teaspoonful could irradiate a whole planet.

‘I’m glad I’m not a planet,’ muttered Zaphod.

‘You’d have nothing to fear,’ assured the official from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration, ‘planets are very safe. Provided,’ he added—and paused. They were approaching the hold nearest to the point where the back of the Starship Billion Year Bunker was broken. The corridor here was twisted and deformed, and the floor was damp and sticky in patches.

‘Ho hum,’ he said, ‘ho very much hum.’

‘What’s in this hold?’ demanded Zaphod.

‘By-products,’ said the official, clamming up again.

‘By-products ...’ insisted Zaphod, quietly, ‘of what?’

Neither official answered. Instead, they examined the hold door very carefully and saw that its seals were twisted apart by the forces that had deformed the whole corridor. One of them touched the door lightly. It swung open to his touch. There was darkness inside, with just a couple of dim yellow lights deep within it.

‘Of what?’ hissed Zaphod.

The leading official turned to the other.

‘There’s an escape capsule,’ he said, ‘that the crew were to use to abandon ship before jettisoning it into the black hole,’ he said. ‘I think it would be good to know that it’s still there.’ The other official nodded and left without a word.

The first official quietly beckoned Zaphod in. The large dim yellow lights glowed about twenty feet from them.

‘The reason,’ he said, quietly, ‘why everything else in this ship is, I maintain, safe, is that no one is really crazy enough to use them. No one. At least no one that crazy would ever get near them. Anyone that mad or dangerous would ring very deep alarm bells. People may be stupid but they’re not that stupid.’

‘By-products,’ hissed Zaphod again—he had to hiss in order that his voice shouldn’t be heard to tremble—‘of what?’

‘Er, Designer People.’

‘What?’

‘The Sirius Cybernetics Corporation were awarded a huge research grant to design and produce synthetic personalities to order. The results were uniformly disastrous. All the “people” and “personalities” turned out to be amalgams of characteristics which simply could not co-exist in naturally occurring life forms. Most of them were just poor pathetic misfits, but some were deeply, deeply dangerous. Dangerous because they didn’t ring alarm bells in other people. They could walk through situations the way that ghosts walk through walls, because no one spotted the danger.

‘The most dangerous of all were three identical ones—they were put in this hold, to be blasted, with this ship, right out of this universe. They are not evil, in fact they are rather simple and charming. But they are the most dangerous creatures that ever lived because there is nothing they will not do if allowed, and nothing they will not be allowed to do ...’

Zaphod looked at the dim yellow lights, the two dim yellow lights. As his eyes became accustomed to the light he saw that the two lights framed a third

space where something was broken. Wet sticky patches gleamed dully on the floor. Zaphod and the official walked cautiously towards the lights. At that moment, four words came crashing into the helmet headsets from the other official.

‘The capsule has gone,’ he said tersely.

‘Trace it,’ snapped Zaphod’s companion. ‘Find exactly where it has gone. We must know where it has gone!’

Zaphod approached the two remaining tanks. A quick glance showed him that each contained an identical floating body. He examined one more carefully. The body, that of an elderly man, was floating in a thick yellow liquid. The man was kindly-looking with lots of pleasant laugh lines round his face. His hair seemed unnaturally thick and dark for someone of his age, and his right hand seemed continually to be weaving forward and back, up and down, as if shaking hands with an endless succession of unseen ghosts. He smiled genially, babbled and burbled like a half-sleeping baby and occasionally seemed to rock very slightly with little tremors of laughter, as if he had just told himself a joke he hadn’t heard before, or didn’t remember properly. Waving, smiling, chortling, with little yellow bubbles beading on his lips, he seemed to inhabit a distant world of simple dreams. Another terse message suddenly came through his helmet headset. The planet towards which the escape capsule had headed had already been identified. It was in Galactic Sector ZZ9 Plural Z Alpha.

Zaphod found a small speaker by the tank and turned it on. The man in the yellow liquid babbling gently about a shining city on a hill.

He also heard the Official from the Safety and Civil Reassurance Administration issue instructions to the effect that the missing escape capsule contained a ‘Reagan’ and that the planet in ZZ9 Plural Z Alpha must be made ‘perfectly safe’.

THE WILD ASSES OF THE DEVIL

H. G. Wells

It should come as no surprise to learn that H. G. Wells, the 'Founding Father of Modern Science Fiction' as he has been called, also wrote some humorous SF stories. After all, this was the man who, in a dozen years and almost as many novels—from The Time Machine (1895) by way of 'The First Men in the Moon' (1901) to In the Days of the Comet (1906)—worked out the basic plot structures and thematic material on which modern Science Fiction has been built. His greatest achievement was perhaps the introduction of the alien being as an invader of the Earth in The War of the Worlds (1898), while the least known are his contributions to humorous fantasy in the shape of short stories like 'The Truth About Pyecraft', 'The Story of the Last Trump' and the supernatural comedy 'The Inexperienced Ghost' which was filmed in 1945.

Herbert George Wells (1866—1946) was the son of a shopkeeper whose studies at the School of Science in London opened his eyes and inspired his imagination to change speculative literature forever. It was in his later works, however, that Wells most clearly demonstrated his interest in fantasy—for example, Star-Begotten: A Biological Fantasia (1937), featuring cosmic rays from Mars; The Camford Visitation (1937), about a mocking voice that disturbs life at a university; and All Aboard for Ararat (1941), in which God asks Noah to build a second Ark and this time leave man behind to sort out his own destiny. There were elements of gentle wit to be found in some of his earlier stories, such as 'The Chronic Argonauts' (1888), 'The Advent of the Flying Man' (1893) and 'The Flowering of the Strange Orchid' (1894).

Forgotten among all this work is 'The Wild Asses of the Devil' which Wells composed in about 1908 while living in Sandgate, near Folkestone, where the story is almost certainly set. It is a comic fantasia about an author and his encounter with perhaps the best known 'alien' of all, and it demonstrates yet again that Wells was ahead of his contemporaries in the writing of fantasy and also in setting the standards for the future...

* * * *

There was once an Author who pursued fame and prosperity in a pleasant villa on the south coast of England. He wrote stories of an acceptable nature and rejoiced in a growing public esteem, carefully offending no one and seeking only to please. He had married under circumstances of qualified and tolerable romance a lady who wrote occasional but otherwise regular verse, he was the father of a little daughter, whose reported sayings added much to his popularity, and some of the very best people in the land asked him to dinner. He was a deputy-lieutenant and a friend of the Prime Minister, a literary knighthood was no remote possibility for him, and even the Nobel Prize, given a sufficient longevity, was not altogether beyond his hopes. And this amount of prosperity had not betrayed him into any un-English pride. He remembered that manliness and simplicity which are expected from authors. He smoked pipes and not the excellent cigars he could have afforded. He kept his hair cut and never posed. He did not hold himself aloof from people of the inferior and less successful classes. He habitually travelled third class in order to study the characters he put into his delightful novels; he went for long walks and sat in inns, accosting people; he drew out his gardener. And though he worked steadily, he did not give up the care of his body, which threatened a certain plumpness and what is more to the point, a localised plumpness, not generally spread over the system but exaggerating the anterior equator. This expansion was his only care. He thought about fitness and played tennis, and every day, wet or fine, he went for at least an hour's walk ...

Yet this man, so representative of Edwardian literature—for it is in the reign of good King Edward the story begins—in spite of his enviable achievements and prospects, was doomed to the most exhausting and dubious adventures before his life came to its unhonoured end...

Because I have not told you everything about him. Sometimes—in the morning sometimes—he would be irritable and have quarrels with his shaving things, and there were extraordinary moods when it would seem to him that living quite beautifully in a pleasant villa and being well-off and famous, and writing books that were always good-humoured and grammatical and a little distinguished in an inoffensive way, was about as boring and

intolerable a life as any creature with a soul to be damned could possibly pursue. Which shows only that God in putting him together had not forgotten that viscus the liver which is usual on such occasions . . .

The winter at the seaside is less agreeable and more bracing than the summer, and there were days when this Author had almost to force himself through the wholesome, necessary routines of his life, when the south-west wind savaged his villa and roared in the chimneys and slapped its windows with gustsful of rain and promised to wet that Author thoroughly and exasperatingly down his neck and round his wrists and ankles directly he put his nose outside his door. And the grey waves he saw from his window came rolling inshore under the hurrying grey rain-bursts, line after line, to smash along the undercliff into vast, feathering fountains of foam and sud and send a salt-tasting spin-drift into his eyes. But manfully he would put on his puttees and his waterproof cape and his biggest brierwood pipe, and out he would go into the whurry-balloo of it all, knowing that so he would be all the brighter for his nice story-writing after tea.

On such a day he went out. He went out very resolutely along the seaside gardens of gravel and tamarisk and privet, resolved to oblige himself to go right past the harbour and up to the top of the east cliff before ever he turned his face back to the comforts of fire and wife and tea and buttered toast...

And somewhere, perhaps half a mile away from home, he became aware of a queer character trying to keep abreast of him.

His impression was of a very miserable black man in the greasy, blue-black garments of a stoker, a lascar probably from a steamship in the harbour, and going with a sort of lame hobble.

As he passed this individual the Author had a transitory thought of how much Authors don't know in the world, how much, for instance, this shivering, cringing body might be hiding within itself, of inestimable value as 'local colour' if only one could get hold of it for 'putting into' one's large acceptable novels. Why doesn't one sometimes tap these sources? Kipling, for example, used to do so, with most successful results . . . And then the Author became aware that this enigma was hurrying to overtake him. He slackened his pace...

The creature wasn't asking for a light; it was begging for a box of matches. And what was odd, in quite good English.

The Author surveyed the beggar and slapped his pockets. Never had he seen so miserable a face. It was by no means a prepossessing face, with its aquiline nose, its sloping brows, its dark, deep, bloodshot eyes much too close together, its V-shaped, dishonest mouth and drenched chin-tuft. And yet it was attractively animal and pitiful. The idea flashed suddenly into the Author's head: 'Why not, instead of going on, thinking emptily, through this beastly weather—why not take this man back home now, to the warm, dry study, and give him a hot drink and something to smoke, and *draw him out?*'

Get something technical and first-hand that would rather score off Kipling.

'It's damnably cold!' he shouted, in a sort of hearty, forecastle voice.

'It's worse than that,' said the strange stoker.

'It's a hell of a day!' said the Author, more forcible than ever.

'Don't remind me of hell,' said the stoker, in a voice of inappeasable regret.

The Author slapped his pockets again. 'You've got an infernal cold. Look here, my man—confound it! would you like a hot grog ... ?'

The scene shifts to the Author's study—a blazing coal fire, the stoker sitting dripping and steaming before it, with his feet inside the fender, while the Author fusses about the room, directing the preparation of hot drinks. The Author is acutely aware not only of the stoker but of himself. The stoker has probably never been in the home of an Author before; he is probably awestricken at the array of books, at the comfort, convenience, and efficiency of the home, at the pleasant personality entertaining him ... Meanwhile the Author does not forget that the stoker is material, is 'copy', is being watched, *observed*. So he poses and watches, until presently he forgets to pose in his astonishment at the thing he is observing. Because this stoker is rummier than a stoker ought to be—

He does not simply accept a hot drink; he informs his host just how hot the drink must be to satisfy him.

‘Isn’t there something you could put in it—something called red pepper? I’ve tasted that once or twice. It’s good. If you could put in a bit of red pepper.’

‘If you can stand that sort of thing?’

‘And if there isn’t much water, can’t you set light to the stuff? Or let me drink it boiling, out of a pannikin or something? Pepper and all.’

Wonderful fellows, these stokers! The Author went to the bell and asked for red pepper.

And then as he came back to the fire he saw something that he instantly dismissed as an optical illusion, as a mirage effect of the clouds of steam his guest was disengaging. The stoker was sitting, all crouched up, as close over the fire as he could contrive; and he was holding his black hands, not to the fire but *in* the fire, holding them pressed flat against two red, glowing masses of coal ... He glanced over his shoulder at the Author with a guilty start, and then instantly the Author perceived that the hands were five or six inches away from the coal.

Then came smoking. The Author produced one of his big cigars—for although a conscientious pipe-smoker himself he gave people cigars; and then, again struck by something odd, he went off into a corner of the room where a little oval mirror gave him a means of watching the stoker undetected. And this is what he saw.

He saw the stoker, after a furtive glance at him, deliberately turn the cigar round, place the lighted end in his mouth, inhale strongly, and blow a torrent of sparks and smoke out of his nose. His firelit face as he did this expressed a diabolical relief. Then very hastily he reversed the cigar again, and turned round to look at the Author. The Author turned slowly towards him.

‘You like that cigar?’ he asked, after one of those mutual pauses that break down a pretence.

‘It’s admirable.’

‘Why do you smoke it the other way round?’

The stoker perceived he was caught. ‘It’s a stokehole trick,’ he said. ‘Do you mind if I do it? I didn’t think you saw.’

‘Pray smoke just as you like,’ said the Author, and advanced to watch the operation.

It was exactly like the fire-eater at the village fair. The man stuck the burning cigar into his mouth and blew sparks out of his nostrils. ‘Ah!’ he said, with a note of genuine satisfaction. And then, with the cigar still burning in the corner of his mouth, he turned to the fire and *began to rearrange the burning coals with his hands* so as to pile up a great glowing mass. He picked up flaming and white-hot lumps as one might pick up lumps of sugar. The Author watched him, dumbfounded.

‘I say!’ he cried. ‘You stokers get a bit tough.’

The stoker dropped the glowing piece of coal in his hand. ‘I forgot,’ he said, and sat back a little.

‘Isn’t that a bit—*extra*?’ asked the Author, regarding him. ‘Isn’t that some sort of trick?’

‘We get so tough down there,’ said the stoker, and paused discreetly as the servant came in with the red pepper.

‘Now you can drink,’ said the Author, and set himself to mix a drink of a pungency that he would have considered murderous ten minutes before. When he had done, the stoker reached over and added more red pepper.

‘I don’t quite see how it is your hand doesn’t burn,’ said the Author as the stoker drank. The stoker shook his head over the uptilted glass.

‘Incombustible,’ he said, putting it down. ‘Could I have just a tiny drop more? Just brandy and pepper, if you *don’t* mind. Set alight. I don’t care for water except when it’s superheated steam.’

And as the Author poured out another stiff glass of this incandescent brew, the stoker put up his hand and scratched the matted black hair over his temple. Then instantly he desisted and sat looking wickedly at the Author, while the Author stared at him aghast. For at the corner of his square, high, narrow forehead, revealed for an instant by the thrusting back of the hair, a curious stumpy excrescence had been visible; and the top of his ear—he had a pointed top to his ear!

‘A-a-a-a-h!’ said the Author, with dilated eyes.

‘A-a-a-a-h!’ said the stoker, in hopeless distress.

‘But you aren’t—!’

‘I know—I know I’m not. I know ... I’m a devil. A poor, lost, homeless devil.’

And suddenly, with a gesture of indescribable despair, the apparent stoker buried his face in his hands and burst into tears.

‘Only man who’s ever been decently kind to me,’ he sobbed. ‘And now—you’ll chuck me out again into the beastly wet and cold...Beautiful fire . . . Nice drink . . . Almost homelike...Just to torment me ... Boo-ooh!’

And let it be recorded to the credit of our little Author, that he did overcome his momentary horror, that he did go quickly round the table, and that he patted that dirty stoker’s shoulder.

‘There!’ he said. ‘There! Don’t mind my rudeness. Have another nice drink. Have a hell of a drink. I won’t turn you out if you’re unhappy—on a day like this. Just have a mouthful of pepper, man, and pull yourself together.’

And suddenly the poor devil caught hold of his arm. ‘Nobody good to me,’ he sobbed. ‘Nobody good to me.’ And his tears ran down over the Author’s plump little hand—scalding tears.

All really wonderful things happen rather suddenly and without any great emphasis upon their wonderfulness, and this was no exception to the general

rule. This Author went on comforting his devil as though this was nothing more than a chance encounter with an unhappy child, and the devil let his grief and discomfort have vent in a manner that seemed at the time as natural as anything could be. He was clearly a devil of feeble character and uncertain purpose, much broken down by harshness and cruelty, and it throws a curious light upon the general state of misconception with regard to matters diabolical that it came as a quite pitiful discovery to our Author that a devil could be unhappy and heart-broken. For a long time his most earnest and persistent questioning could gather nothing except that his guest was an exile from a land of great warmth and considerable entertainment, and it was only after considerable further applications of brandy and pepper that the sobbing confidences of the poor creature grew into the form of a coherent and understandable narrative.

And then it became apparent that this person was one of the very lowest types of infernal denizen, and that his role in the dark realms of Dis had been that of watcher and minder of a herd of sinister beings hitherto unknown to our Author, the Devil's Wild Asses, which pastured in a stretch of meadows near the Styx. They were, he gathered, unruly, dangerous, and enterprising beasts, amenable only to a certain formula of expletives, which instantly reduced them to obedience. These expletives the stoker-devil would not repeat; to do so except when actually addressing one of the Wild Asses would, he explained, involve torments of the most terrible description. The bare thought of them gave him a shivering fit. But he gave the Author to understand that to crack these curses as one drove the Wild Asses to and from their grazing on the Elysian fields was a by no means disagreeable amusement. The ass-herds would try who could crack the loudest until the welkin rang.

And speaking of these things, the poor creature gave a picture of diabolical life that impressed the Author as by no means unpleasant for anyone with a suitable constitution. It was like the Idylls of Theocritus done in fire; the devils drove their charges along burning lanes and sat gossiping in hedges of flames, rejoicing in the warm dry breezes (which it seems are rendered peculiarly bracing by the faint flavour of brimstone in the air), and watching the harpies and furies and witches circling in the perpetual afterglow of that inferior sky. And ever and again there would be holidays, and one would

take one's lunch and wander over the sulphur craters picking flowers of sulphur or fishing for the souls of usurers and publishers and house-agents and land-agents in the lakes of boiling pitch. It was good sport, for the usurers and publishers and house-agents and land-agents were always eager to be caught; they crowded round the hooks and fought violently for the bait, and protested vehemently and entertainingly against the Rules and Regulations that compelled their instant return to the lake of fire.

And sometimes when he was on holiday this particular devil would go through the saltpetre dunes, where the witches' brooms grow and the blasted heath is in flower, to the landing-place of the ferry whence the Great Road runs through the shops and banks of the Via Dolorosa to the New Judgement Hall, and watch the crowds of damned arriving by the steam ferry-boats of the Consolidated Charon Company. This steam-boat-gazing seems about as popular down there as it is at Folkestone. Almost every day notable people arrive, and, as the devils are very well informed about terrestrial affairs—for of course all the earthly newspapers go straight to hell—whatever else could one expect?—they get ovations of an almost undergraduate intensity. At times you can hear their cheering or booing, as the case may be, right away on the pastures where the Wild Asses feed. And that had been this particular devil's undoing.

He had always been interested in the career of the Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone...

He was minding the Wild Asses. He knew the risks. He knew the penalties. But when he heard the vast uproar, when he heard the eager voices in the lane of fire saying, 'It's Gladstone at last!' when he saw how quietly and unsuspectingly the Wild Asses cropped their pasture, the temptation was too much. He slipped away. He saw the great Englishman landed after a slight straggle. He joined in the outcry of 'Speech! Speech!' He heard the first delicious promise of a Home Rule movement which should break the last feeble links of Celestial Control...

And meanwhile the Wild Asses escaped—according to the rules and the prophecies...

The little Author sat and listened to this tale of a wonder that never for a moment struck him as incredible. And outside his rain-lashed window the strung-out fishing smacks pitched and rolled on their way home to Folkestone harbour...

The Wild Asses escaped.

They got away to the world. And his superior officers took the poor herdsman and tried him and bullied him and passed this judgement upon him: that he must go to the earth and find the Wild Asses, and say to them that certain string of oaths that otherwise must never be repeated, and so control them and bring them back to hell. That—or else one pinch of salt on their tails. It did not matter which. One by one he must bring them back, driving them by spell and curse to the cattle-boat of the ferry. And until he had caught and brought them all back he might never return again to the warmth and comfort of his accustomed life. That was his sentence and punishment. And they put him into a shrapnel shell and fired him out among the stars, and when he had a little recovered he pulled himself together and made his way to the world.

But he never found his Wild Asses and after a little time he gave up trying.

He gave up trying because the Wild Asses, once they had got out of control, developed the most amazing gifts. They could, for instance, disguise themselves with any sort of human shape, and the only way in which they differed then from a normal human being was—according to the printed paper of instructions that had been given to their custodian when he was fired out—that ‘their general conduct remains that of a Wild Ass of the Devil.’

‘And what interpretation can we put upon *that*?’ he asked the listening Author.

And there was one night in the year—Walpurgis Night—when the Wild Asses became visibly great black wild asses and kicked up their hind legs and brayed. They had to. ‘But then, of course,’ said the devil, ‘they would take care to shut themselves up somewhere when they felt that coming on.’

Like most weak characters, the stoker devil was intensely egotistical. He was anxious to dwell upon his own miseries and discomforts and difficulties and the general injustice of his treatment, and he was careless and casually indicative about the peculiarities of the Wild Asses, the matter which most excited and interested the Author. He bored on with his doleful story, and the Author had to interrupt with questions again and again in order to get any clear idea of the situation.

The devil's main excuse for his nervelessness was his profound ignorance of human nature. 'So far as I can see,' he said, 'they might all be Wild Asses. I tried it once—'

'Tried what?'

'The formula. You know.'

'Yes?'

'On a man named Sir Edward Carson.'

'Well?'

'*Ugh!*' said the devil.

'Punishment?'

'Don't speak of it. He was just a professional lawyer-politician who had lost his sense of values . . . How was *I* to know...? But our people certainly know how to hurt...'

After that it would seem this poor devil desisted absolutely from any attempt to recover his lost charges. He just tried to live for the moment and make his earthly existence as tolerable as possible. It was clear he hated the world. He found it cold, wet, draughty ... 'I can't understand why everybody insists upon living outside of it,' he said. 'If you went inside—'

He sought warmth and dryness. For a time he found a kind of contentment in charge of the upcast furnace of a mine, and then he was superseded by an electric-fan. While in this position he read a vivid account of the intense heat

in the Red Sea, and he was struck by the idea that if he could get a job as stoker upon an Indian liner he might snatch some days of real happiness during that portion of the voyage. For some time his natural ineptitude prevented his realising this project, but at last, after some bitter experiences of homelessness during a London December, he had been able to ship on an Indiaward boat—only to get stranded in Folkestone in consequence of a propeller breakdown. And so here he was!

He paused.

‘But about these Wild Asses?’ said the Author.

The mournful, dark eyes looked at him hopelessly.

‘Mightn’t they do a lot of mischief?’ asked the Author.

‘They’ll do no end of mischief,’ said the despondent devil.

‘Ultimately you’ll catch it for that?’

‘Ugh!’ said the stoker, trying not to think of it.

Now the spirit of romantic adventure slumbers in the most unexpected places, and I have already told you of our plump Author’s discontents. He had been like a smouldering bomb for some years. Now, he burst out. He suddenly became excited, energetic, stimulating, uplifting.

He stood over the drooping devil.

‘But my dear chap!’ he said. ‘You must pull yourself together. You must do better than this. These confounded brutes may be doing all sorts of mischief. While you—shirk ...’

And so on. Real ginger.

‘If I had someone to go with me. Someone who knew his way about.’

The Author took whisky in the excitement of the moment. He began to move very rapidly about his room and make short, sharp gestures. You know how

this sort of emotion wells up at times. ‘We must work from some central place,’ said the Author. ‘To begin with, London perhaps.’

It was not two hours later that they started, this Author and this devil he had taken to himself, upon a mission. They went out in overcoats and warm underclothing—the Author gave the devil a thorough outfit, a double lot of Jaeger’s extra thick—and they were resolved to find the Wild Asses of the Devil and send them back to hell, or at least the Author was, in the shortest possible time. In the picture you will see him with a field-glass slung under his arm, the better to watch suspected cases; in his pocket, wrapped in oiled paper, is a lot of salt to use if by chance he finds a Wild Ass when the devil and his string of oaths is not at hand. So he started. And when he had caught and done for the Wild Asses, then the Author supposed that he would come back to his nice little villa and his nice little wife, and to his little daughter who said the amusing things, and to his popularity, his large gilt-edged popularity, and—except for an added prestige—be just exactly the man he had always been. Little knowing that whosoever takes unto himself a devil and goes out upon a quest, goes out upon a quest from which there is no returning—

Nevermore.

MINISTERING ANGELS

C. S. Lewis

The fantasies of H. G. Wells influenced many later writers, among them C. S. Lewis in his classic trilogy of interplanetary romances about his intrepid travelling philologist, Dr Ransom—Out of the Silent Planet (1938), Voyage to Venus (1943) and That Hideous Strength (1945). In a preface to the first book Lewis acknowledged his debt to Wells, while in the third he introduced his mentor, thinly disguised, in the rather unflattering role of a cockney journalist named Horace Jules. In a note at the end of That Hideous Strength—which he described as ‘a tall story about devilry’—he added, ‘Those who would like to learn further about Numinor and the True West must (alas!) await the publication of much that still exists only in the MSS of my friend, Professor J. R. R. Tolkien.’ Among Lewis’ other notable works are The Screwtape Letters (1943), a series of missives by an old devil to a younger one, advising him how to capture human souls; The Great Divorce (1945), a fantasy about Heaven and Hell; and the very popular fantasy series of seven books for children, “The Chronicles of Narnia”, published between 1950 and 1956.

Clive Staples Lewis (1898—1963) was born in Belfast. After taking his degree at Oxford he followed an academic career and eventually became Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Magdalen College where he was a close friend of two other academics who wrote fantasy fiction, J. R. R. Tolkien and Charles Williams. Lewis was a passionate Christian apologist and this found its way into most of his books—although the excitement and humour of his stories prevented them from ever becoming boring to readers with no religious inclination. Curiously, he wrote very few short stories, but one which perfectly suits this collection is ‘Ministering Angels’ which was first published in Fantasy and Science Fiction, January 1958. It was evidently inspired by an article in the Saturday Review of May 1955 on a subject close to Lewis’ heart: ‘The Day We Land On Mars’. In it Dr Robert S. Richardson wrote, ‘If space travel and colonisation of the planets eventually become possible on a fairly large scale, it seems that we may be forced into first tolerating and

finally openly accepting an attitude towards sex that is taboo in our present social framework...To put it bluntly, may it not be necessary for the success of the project to send some nice girls to Mars at regular intervals to relieve tensions and promote morale?’ This thought intrigued Lewis and the result was the following little masterpiece which time and changing attitudes towards sexuality have done nothing to spoil.

* * * *

The Monk, as they called him, settled himself on the camp chair beside his bunk and stared through the window at the harsh sand and black-blue sky of Mars. He did not mean to begin his ‘work’ for ten minutes yet. Not, of course, the work he had been brought there to do. He was the meteorologist of the party, and his work in that capacity was largely done; he had found out whatever could be found out. There was nothing more, within the limited radius he could investigate, to be observed for at least twenty-five days. And meteorology had not been his real motive. He had chosen three years on Mars as the nearest modern equivalent to a hermitage in the desert. He had come there to meditate: to continue the slow, perpetual rebuilding of that inner structure which, in his view, it was the main purpose of life to rebuild. And now his ten minutes’ rest was over. He began with his well-used formula. ‘Gentle and patient Master, teach me to need men less and to love thee more.’ Then to it. There was no time to waste. There were barely six months of this lifeless, sinless, unsuffering wilderness ahead of him. Three years were short. . . but when the shout came he rose out of his chair with the practised alertness of a sailor.

The Botanist in the next cabin responded to the same shout with a curse. His eye had been at the microscope when it came. It was maddening. Constant interruption. A man might as well try to work in the middle of Piccadilly as in this infernal camp. And his work was already a race against time. Six months more ... and he had hardly begun. The flora of Mars, these tiny, miraculously hardy organisms, the ingenuity of their contrivances to live under all but impossible conditions—it was a feast for a lifetime. He would ignore the shout. But then came the bell. All hands to the main room.

The only person who was doing, so to speak, nothing when the shout came was the Captain. To be more exact, he was (as usual) trying to stop thinking

about Clare, and get on with his official journal. Clare kept on interrupting from forty million miles away. It was preposterous. ‘*Would have needed all hands,*’ he wrote...hands...his own hands ... his own hands, hands, he felt, with eyes in them, travelling over all the warm-cool, soft-firm, smooth, yielding, resisting aliveness of her. ‘Shut up, there’s a dear,’ he said to the photo on his desk. And so back to the journal, until the fatal words ‘*had been causing me some anxiety*’. Anxiety—oh God, what might be happening to Clare now? How did he know there was a Clare by this time? Anything could happen. He’d been a fool ever to accept this job. What other newly married man in the world would have done it? But it had seemed so sensible. Three years of horrid separation but then ... oh, they were made for life. He had been promised the post that, only a few months before, he would not have dared to dream of. He’d never need to go to Space again. And all the by-products; the lectures, the book, probably a title. Plenty of children. He knew she wanted that, and so in a queer way (as he began to find) did he. But damn it, the journal. Begin a new paragraph...And then the shout came.

It was one of the two youngsters, technicians both, who had given it. They had been together since dinner. At least Paterson had been standing at the open door of Dickson’s cabin, shifting from foot to foot and swinging the door, and Dickson had been sitting on his berth and waiting for Paterson to go away.

‘What are you talking about, Paterson?’ he said. ‘Who ever said anything about a quarrel?’

‘That’s all very well, Bobby,’ said the other, ‘but we’re not friends like we used to be. You know we’re not. Oh, *I’m* not blind. I *did* ask you to call me Clifford. And you’re always so stand-offish.’

‘Oh, get to Hell out of this!’ cried Dickson. ‘I’m perfectly ready to be good friends with you and everyone else in an ordinary way, but all this gas—like a pair of school girls—I will not stand. Once and for all—’

‘Oh look, look, look,’ said Paterson. And it was then that Dickson shouted and the Captain came and rang the bell and within twenty seconds they were all crowded behind the biggest of the windows. A spaceship had just made a beautiful landing about a hundred and fifty yards from camp.

‘Oh boy!’ exclaimed Dickson. ‘They’re relieving us before our time.’

‘Damn their eyes. Just what they would do,’ said the Botanist.

Five figures were descending from the ship. Even in space suits it was clear that one of them was enormously fat; they were in no other way remarkable.

‘Man the air lock,’ said the Captain.

Drinks from their limited store were going round. The Captain had recognised in the leader of the strangers an old acquaintance, Ferguson. Two were ordinary young men, not unpleasant. But the remaining two?

‘I don’t understand,’ said the Captain, ‘who exactly—I mean we’re delighted to see you all of course—but what exactly...?’

‘Where are the rest of your party?’ said Ferguson.

‘We’ve had two casualties, I’m afraid,’ said the Captain. ‘Sackville and Dr Burton. It was a most wretched business. Sackville tried eating the stuff we call Martian cress. It drove him fighting mad in a matter of minutes. He knocked Burton down and by sheer bad luck Burton fell in just the wrong position: across that table there. Broke his neck. We got Sackville tied down on a bunk but he was dead before the evening.’

‘Hadna he even the gumption to try it on the guinea pig first?’ said Ferguson.

‘Yes,’ said the Botanist. ‘That was the whole trouble. The funny thing is that the guinea pig lived. But its behaviour was remarkable. Sackville wrongly concluded that the stuff was alcoholic. Thought he’d invent a new drink. The nuisance is that once Burton was dead, none of us could do a reliable post-mortem on Sackville. Under analysis this vegetable shows—’

‘A-a-a-h,’ interrupted one of those who had not yet spoken. ‘We must beware of oversimplifications. I doubt if the vegetable substance is the real explanation. There are stresses and strains. You are all, without knowing it, in a highly unstable condition, for reasons which are no mystery to a trained psychologist.’

Some of those present had doubted the sex of this creature. Its hair was very short, its nose very long, its mouth very prim, its chin sharp, and its manner authoritative. The voice revealed it as, scientifically speaking, a woman. But no one had had any doubt about the sex of her nearest neighbour, the fat person.

‘Oh, dearie,’ she wheezed. ‘Not now. I tell you straight I’m that flustered and faint, I’ll scream if you go on so. Suppose there ain’t such a thing as a port and lemon handy? No? Well, a little drop more gin would settle me. It’s me stomach reelly.’

The speaker was infinitely female and perhaps in her seventies. Her hair had been not very successfully dyed to a colour not unlike that of mustard. The powder (scented strongly enough to throw a train off the rails) lay like snow drifts in the complex valleys of her creased, many-chinned face.

‘Stop,’ roared Ferguson. ‘Whatever ye do, dinna give her a drap mair to drink.’

‘ ‘E’s no ‘art, ye see,’ said the old woman with a whimper and an affectionate leer directed at Dickson.

‘Excuse me,’ said the Captain. ‘Who are these—ah—ladies and what is this all about?’

‘I have been waiting to explain,’ said the Thin Woman, and cleared her throat. ‘Anyone who has been following World-Opinion-Trends on the problems arising out of the psychological welfare aspect of interplanetary communication will be conscious of the growing agreement that such a remarkable advance inevitably demands of us far-reaching ideological adjustments. Psychologists are now well aware that a forcible inhibition of powerful biological urges over a protracted period is likely to have unforeseeable results. The pioneers of space travel are exposed to this danger. It would be unenlightened if a supposed ethicality were allowed to stand in the way of their protection. We must therefore nerve ourselves to face the view that immorality, as it has hitherto been called, must no longer be regarded as unethical—’

‘I don’t understand that,’ said the Monk.

‘She means,’ said the Captain, who was a good linguist, ‘that what you call fornication must no longer be regarded as immoral.’

‘That’s right, dearie,’ said the Fat Woman to Dickson, ‘she only means a poor boy needs a woman now and then. It’s only natural.’

‘What was required, therefore,’ continued the Thin Woman, ‘was a band of devoted females who would take the first step. This would expose them, no doubt, to obloquy from many ignorant persons. They would be sustained by the consciousness that they were performing an indispensable function in the history of human progress.’

‘She means you’re to have tarts, duckie,’ said the Fat Woman to Dickson.

‘Now you’re talking,’ said he with enthusiasm. ‘Bit late in the day, but better late than never. But you can’t have brought many girls in that ship. And why didn’t you bring them in? Or are they following?’

‘We cannot indeed claim,’ continued the Thin Woman, who had apparently not noticed the interruption, ‘that the response to our appeal was such as we had hoped. The personnel of the first unit of the Women’s Higher Aphrodisio-Therapeutic Humane Organisation (abbreviated WHAT-HO) is not perhaps ... well. Many excellent women, university colleagues of my own, even senior colleagues, to whom I applied, showed themselves curiously conventional. But at least a start has been made. And here,’ she concluded brightly, ‘we are.’

And there, for forty seconds of appalling silence, they were. Then Dickson’s face, which had already undergone certain contortions, became very red; he applied his handkerchief and spluttered like a man trying to stifle a sneeze, rose abruptly, turned his back on the company, and hid his face. He stood slightly stooped and you could see his shoulders shaking.

Paterson jumped up and ran towards him; but the Fat Woman, though with infinite gruntings and upheavals, had risen too.

‘Get art of it, Pansy,’ she snarled at Paterson. ‘Lot o’ good your sort ever did.’ A moment later her vast arms were round Dickson; all the warm, wobbling maternalism of her engulfed him.

‘There, sonny,’ she said, ‘it’s goin’ to be OK. Don’t cry, honey. Don’t cry. Poor boy, then. Poor boy. I’ll give you a good time.’

‘I think,’ said the Captain, ‘the young man is laughing, not crying.’

It was the Monk who at this point mildly suggested a meal.

Some hours later the party had temporarily broken up.

Dickson (despite all his efforts the Fat Woman had contrived to sit next to him; she had more than once mistaken his glass for hers) hardly finished his last mouthful when he said to the newly arrived technicians:

‘I’d love to see over your ship, if I could.’

You might expect that two men who had been cooped up in that ship so long, and had only taken off their space suits a few minutes ago, would have been reluctant to re-assume the one and return to the other. That was certainly the Fat Woman’s view. ‘Nar, nar,’ she said. ‘Don’t you go fidgeting, sonny. They seen enough of that ruddy ship for a bit, same as me. ‘Tain’t good for you to go rushing about, not on a full stomach, like.’ But the two young men were marvellously obliging.

‘Certainly. Just what I was going to suggest,’ said the first. ‘OK by me, chum,’ said the second. They were all three of them out of the air lock in record time.

Across the sand, up the ladder, helmets off, and then:

‘What in the name of thunder have you dumped those two bitches on us for?’ said Dickson.

‘Don’t fancy ‘em?’ said the Cockney stranger. ‘The people at ‘ome thought as ‘ow you’d be a bit sharp set by now. Ungrateful of you, I call it.’

‘Very funny to be sure,’ said Dickson. ‘But it’s no laughing matter for us.’

‘It hasn’t been for us either, you know,’ said the Oxford stranger. ‘Cheek by jowl with them for eighty-five days. They palled a bit after the first month.’

‘You’re telling me,’ said the Cockney.

There was a disgusted pause.

‘Can anyone tell me,’ said Dickson at last, ‘who in the world, and why in the world, out of all possible women, selected those two horrors to send to Mars?’

‘Can’t expect a star London show at the back of beyond,’ said the Cockney.

‘My dear fellow,’ said his colleague, ‘isn’t the thing perfectly obvious? What kind of woman, without force, is going to come and live in this ghastly place—on rations—and play doxy to half a dozen men she’s never seen? The Good Time Girls won’t come because they know you can’t have a good time on Mars. An ordinary professional prostitute won’t come as long as she has the slightest chance of being picked up in the cheapest quarter of Liverpool or Los Angeles. And you’ve got one who hasn’t. The only other who’d come would be a crank who believes all that blah about the new ethicality. And you’ve got one of that too.’

‘Simple, ain’t it?’ said the Cockney.

‘Anyone,’ said the other, ‘except the Fools at the Top could of course have foreseen it from the word go.’

‘The only hope now is the Captain,’ said Dickson.

‘Look, mate,’ said the Cockney, ‘if you think there’s any question of our taking back returned goods, you’ve ‘ad it. Nothing doin’. Our Captain’ll ‘ave a mutiny to settle if he tries that. Also ‘e won’t. ‘E’s ‘ad ‘is turn. So’ve we. It’s up to you now.’

‘Fair’s fair, you know,’ said the other. ‘We’ve stood all we can.’

‘Well,’ said Dickson. ‘We must leave the two chiefs to fight it out. But discipline or not, there are some things a man can’t stand. That bloody schoolmarm—’

‘She’s a lecturer at a Redbrick university, actually.’

‘Well,’ said Dickson after a long pause, ‘you were going to show me over the ship. It might take my mind off it a bit.’

The Fat Woman was talking to the Monk. ‘...and oh, Father dear, I know you’ll think that’s the worst of all. I didn’t give it up when I could. After me brother’s wife died...’e’d ‘av ‘ad me ‘ome with ‘im, and money wasn’t that short. But I went on, Gawd ‘elp me, I went on.’

‘Why did you do that, daughter?’ said the Monk. ‘Did you *like* it?’

‘Well not all that, Father. I was never partikler. But you see—oh, Father, I was the goods in those days, though you wouldn’t think it now...and the poor gentlemen, they did so enjoy it.’

‘Daughter,’ he said, ‘you are not far from the Kingdom. But you were wrong. The desire to give is blessed. But you can’t turn bad bank notes into good ones just by giving them away.’

The Captain had also left the table pretty quickly, asking Ferguson to accompany him to his cabin. The Botanist had leaped after them.

‘One moment, sir, one moment,’ he said excitedly. ‘I am a scientist. I’m working at very high pressure already. I hope there is no complaint to be made about my discharge of all those other duties which so incessantly interrupt my work. But if I am going to be expected to waste any more time entertaining those abominable females—’

‘When I give you any orders which can be considered *ultra vires*,’ said the Captain, ‘it will be time to make your protest.’

Paterson stayed with the Thin Woman. The only part of any woman that interested him was her ears. He liked telling women about his troubles;

especially about the unfairness and unkindness of other men. Unfortunately the lady's idea was that the interview should be devoted either to Aphrodisio-Therapy or to instruction in psychology. She saw, indeed, no reason why the two operations should not be carried out simultaneously; it is only untrained minds that cannot hold more than one idea. The difference between these two conceptions of the conversation was well on its way to impairing its success. Paterson was becoming ill-tempered; the lady remained bright and patient as an iceberg.

‘But as I was saying,’ grumbled Paterson, ‘what I do think so rotten is a fellow being quite fairly decent one day and then—’

‘Which just illustrates my point. These tensions and maladjustments are bound, under the unnatural conditions, to arise. And provided we disinfect the obvious remedy of all those sentimental or—which is quite as bad—prurient associations which the Victorian Age attached to it—’

‘But I haven’t yet told you. Listen. Only two days ago—’

‘One moment. This ought to be regarded like any other injection. If once we can persuade—’

‘How any fellow can take a pleasure—’

‘I agree. The association of it with pleasure (that is purely an adolescent fixation) may have done incalculable harm. Rationally viewed—’

‘I say, you’re getting off the point.’

‘One moment—’

The dialogue continued.

They had finished looking over the spaceship. It was certainly a beauty. No one afterwards remembered who had first said, ‘Anyone could manage a ship like this.’

Ferguson sat quietly smoking while the Captain read the letter he had brought him. He didn’t even look in the Captain’s direction. When at last

conversation began there was so much circumambient happiness in the cabin that they took a long time to get down to the difficult part of their business. The Captain seemed at first wholly occupied with its comic side.

‘Still,’ he said at last, ‘it has its serious side too. The impertinence of it, for one thing! Do they think—’

‘Ye maun recall,’ said Ferguson, ‘they’re dealing with an absolutely new situation.’

‘Oh, *new* be damned! How does it differ from men on whalers, or even on windjammers in the old days? Or on the North West Frontier? It’s about as new as people being hungry when food was short.’

‘Eh mon, but ye’re forgettin’ the new light of modern psychology.’

‘I think those two ghastly women have already learned some newer psychology since they arrived. Do they really suppose every man in the world is so combustible that he’ll jump into the arms of any woman whatever?’

‘Aye, they do. They’ll be sayin’ you and your party are verra abnormal. I wadna put it past them to be sending you out wee packets of hormones next.’

‘Well, if it comes to that, do they suppose men would volunteer for a job like this unless they could, or thought they could, or wanted to try if they could, do without women?’

‘Then there’s the new ethics, forbye.’

‘Oh stow it, you old rascal. What is new there either? Who ever tried to live clean except a minority who had a religion or were in love? They’ll try it still on Mars, as they did on Earth. As for the majority, did they ever hesitate to take their pleasures wherever they could get them? The ladies of the profession know better. Did you ever see a port or a garrison town without plenty of brothels? Who are the idiots on the Advisory Council who started all this nonsense?’

‘Och, a pack o’ daft auld women (in trousers for the maist part) who like onything sexy, and onything scientific, and onything that makes them feel important. And this gives them all three pleasures at once, ye ken.’

‘Well, there’s only one thing for it, Ferguson. I’m not going to have either your Mistress Overdone or your Extension lecturer here. You can just—’

‘Now there’s no manner of use talkin’ that way. I did my job. Another voyage with sic a cargo o’ livestock I will not face. And my two lads the same. There’d be mutiny and murder.’

‘But you must, I’m—’

At that moment a blinding flash came from without and the earth shook.

‘Ma ship! Ma ship!’ cried Ferguson. Both men peered out on empty sand. The spaceship had obviously made an excellent take-off.

‘But what’s happened?’ said the Captain. ‘They haven’t—’

‘Mutiny, desertion, and theft of a government ship, that’s what’s happened,’ said Ferguson. ‘Ma twa lads and your Dickson are awa’ hame.’

‘But good Lord, they’ll get Hell for this. They’ve ruined their careers. They’ll be—’

‘Aye. Nae dout. And they think it cheap at the price. Ye’ll be seeing why, maybe, before ye are a fortnight older.’

A gleam of hope came into the Captain’s eyes. ‘They couldn’t have taken the women with them?’

‘Talk sense, mon, talk sense. Or if ye hanna ony sense, use your ears.’

In the buzz of excited conversation which became every moment more audible from the main room, female voices could be intolerably distinguished.

As he composed himself for his evening meditation the Monk thought that perhaps he had been concentrating too much on 'needing less' and that must be why he was going to have a course (advanced) in 'loving more'. Then his face twitched into a smile that was not all mirth. He was thinking of the Fat Woman. Four things made an exquisite chord. First the horror of all she had done and suffered. Secondly, the pity—thirdly, the comicality—of her belief that she could still excite desire; fourthly, her bless'd ignorance of that utterly different loveliness which already existed within her and which, under grace, and with such poor direction as even he could supply, might one day set her, bright in the land of brightness, beside the Magdalene. But wait! There was yet a fifth note in the chord. 'Oh, Master,' he murmured, 'forgive—or can you enjoy?—my absurdity also. I had been supposing you sent me on a voyage of forty million miles merely for my own spiritual convenience.'

THE GNURRS COME FROM THE VOODOOK OUT

Reginald Bretnor

The publication in 1950 of the first story about the ‘mad genius’, Papa Schimmelhorn, heralded what a number of critics have described as a new era of wit and literacy in science fantasy. The subsequent tales about the huge, blue-eyed, white-bearded middle-European who had come to America to start a new life after working as a clock-maker and janitor in Geneva, were quite different from any previous SF comedy series and became an instant hit with readers of Fantasy and Science Fiction magazine which, to date, has published them all. The initial story, ‘The Gnurrs Come from the Voodoo Out’, presented Papa as a newcomer to the United States, but in subsequent years he has settled in New Haven where he now works as the foreman of Heinrich Luedesing’s cuckoo-clock factory—when not involved in some outlandish adventure or in trying to escape his wife’s eagle eye to pursue his favourite pastime as an incorrigible womaniser after beautiful girls. The flavour of these stories can be judged by three typical titles: ‘Papa Schimmelhorn and the S.O.D.O.M. Serum’, ‘Count von Schimmelhorn and the Time-Pony’ and the brilliant, novella-length story, ‘The Ladies of Beetlegoose Nine’, in which the old boy is captured and carried off in a space craft crewed entirely by women!

Reginald Bretnor (1911—) was born in Siberia, but came to America in 1919. His early writing ranged from military theory to the craft of Science Fiction, and his first story, ‘Maybe Just a Little One’, was published in Harper’s Magazine in 1947. This was followed by several traditional SF stories before he launched the Papa Schimmelhorn series. The success of this inspired him in 1956 to devise a series of comic vignettes under the pseudonym-anagram ‘Grendel Briarton’, about a ludicrous time traveller, Ferdinand Feghoot, each of which ended with a punning catch-phrase. Several of these were collected in 1962 as Through Time and Space with Ferdinand Feghoot, and Bretnor has subsequently added new stories to the series at regular intervals.

Here, however, is the ground-breaking story which had such an impact on the fantasy genre as well as on its readers. It is certainly one of the

funniest to be found in this entire collection.

* * * *

When Papa Schimmelhorn heard about the war with Bobovia, he bought a box-lunch, wrapped his secret weapon in brown paper, and took the first bus straight to Washington. He showed up at the main gate of the Secret Weapons Bureau shortly before midday, complete with box-lunch, beard, and bassoon.

That's right—*bassoon*. He had unwrapped his secret weapon. It looked like a bassoon. The difference didn't show.

Corporal Jerry Colliver, on duty at the gate, didn't know there was a difference. All he knew was that the Secret Weapons Bureau was a mock-up, put there to keep the crackpots out of everybody's hair, and that it was a lousy detail, and that there was the whole afternoon to go before his date with Katie.

'Goot morning, soldier boy!' bellowed Papa Schimmelhorn.

Corporal Colliver winked at the two Pfc's who were sunning themselves with him on the guardhouse steps. 'Come back Chris'mus, Santa,' he said. 'We're closed for inventory.'

'No!' Papa Schimmelhorn was annoyed. 'I cannot stay so long from vork. Also, I have here a zecret veapon. Ledt me in!'

The Corporal shrugged. Orders were orders. Crazy or not, you had to let 'em in. He reached back and pressed the loony-button, to alert the psychos just in case. Then, keys jingling, he walked up to the gate. 'A secret weapon, huh!' he said, unlocking it. 'Guess you'll have the war all won and over in a week.'

'A *veek*?' Papa Schimmelhorn roared with laughter. 'Soldier boy, you vait! It is ofer in two days! I am a chenius!'

As he stepped through, Corporal Colliver remembered regulations and asked him sternly if he had any explosives on or about his person.

‘Ho-ho-ho! It iss nodt necessary to haff exblosives to vin a var! Zo all right, you zearch me!’

The corporal searched him. He searched the box-lunch, which contained one devilled egg, two pressed-ham sandwiches, and an apple. He examined the bassoon, shaking it and peering down it to make sure that it was empty.

‘Okay, Pop,’ he said, when he had finished. ‘You can go on in. But you better leave your flute here.’

‘It iss nodt a fludt,’ Papa Schimmelhorn corrected him. ‘It iss a *gnurr-pfeife*. And I must take it because it iss my zecret veapon.’

The corporal, who had been looking forward to an hour or so of trying to tootle ‘Coming Through the Rye’, shrugged philosophically. ‘Barney,’ he said to one of the Pfcs, ‘take this guy to Section Seven.’

As the soldier went off with Papa Schimmelhorn in tow, he pressed the loony-button twice more just for luck. ‘Don’t it beat all,’ he remarked.

Corporal Colliver, of course, didn’t know that Papa Schimmelhorn had spoken only gospel truth. He didn’t know that Papa Schimmelhorn really was a genius, or that the gnurrs would end the war in two days, or that Papa Schimmelhorn would win it.

At ten minutes past one, Colonel Powhattan Fairfax Pollard was still mercifully unaware of Papa Schimmelhorn’s existence.

Colonel Pollard was long and lean and leathery. He wore Peal boots, spurs, and one of those plum-coloured shirts which had been fashionable at Fort Huachuca in the Twenties. He did not believe in secret weapons. He didn’t even believe in atomic bombs and tanks, recoilless rifles and attack aviation. He believed in horses.

The Pentagon had called him back out of retirement to command the Secret Weapons Bureau, and he had been the right man for the job. In the four months of his tenure, only one inventor—a fellow with singularly sound ideas regarding pack-saddles—had been sent on to higher echelons.

Colonel Pollard was seated at his desk, dictating to his blonde WAC secretary from an open copy of Major-General Wardrop's 'Modern Pigsticking'. He was accumulating material for a work of his own, to be entitled 'Sword and Lance in Future Warfare'. Now, in the middle of a quotation outlining the virtues of the Bengal spear, he broke off abruptly. 'Miss Hooper!' he announced. 'A thought has occurred to me!'

Katie Hooper sniffed. If he had to be formal, why couldn't he just say *sergeant*? Other senior officers had always addressed her as *my dear* or *sweetheart*, at least when they were alone. *Miss* Hooper, indeed! She sniffed again, and said, 'Yessir.'

Colonel Pollard snorted, apparently to clear his mind. 'I can state it as a principle,' he began, 'that the mania for these so-called scientific weapons is a grave menace to the security of the United States. Flying in the face of the immutable science of war, we are building one unproved weapon after another, counter-weapons against these weapons, counter-counter-weapons, and—and so on. Armed to the teeth with theories and delusions, we soon may stand impotent—Did you hear me, Miss Hooper? *Impotent*—'

Miss Hooper snickered and said, 'Yessir.'

'—against the onrush of some Attila,' shouted the Colonel, 'some modern Genghis Khan, as yet unborn, who will sweep away our tinkering technicians like chaff, and carve his empire with cavalry! A million mounted moujiks could—'

But the world was not destined to find out just what a million mounted moujiks could or could not do. The door burst open. From the outer office, there came a short, sharp squeal. A plump young officer catapulted across the room, braked to a halt before the Colonel's desk, saluted wildly.

'*Ooooh!*' gasped Katie Hooper, staring with vast blue eyes.

The Colonel's face turned suddenly to stone.

And the young officer caught his breath long enough to cry, 'My God, it—it's happened, sir!'

Lieutenant Hanson was no combat soldier; he was a scientist. He had made no appointment. He had entered without knocking, in a most unmilitary manner. And—And—

‘MISTER!’ roared Colonel Pollard. ‘WHERE ARE YOUR TROUSERS?’

For Lieutenant Hanson obviously was wearing none. Nor was he wearing socks or shoes. And the tattered tails of his shirt barely concealed his shredded shorts.

‘SPEAK UP, DAMMIT!’

Vacantly, the Lieutenant glanced at his lower limbs and back again. He began to tremble. ‘They—they *ate* them!’ he blurted. ‘That’s what I’m trying to tell you! Lord knows how he does it! He’s about eighty, and he’s a—a foreman in a cuckoo-clock factory! But it’s the perfect weapon! And it works, it works, *it works!*’ He laughed hysterically. ‘The gnurrs come from the voodvork out!’ he sang, clapping his hands.

Here Colonel Pollard rose from his chair, vaulted his desk, and tried to calm Lieutenant Hanson by shaking him vigorously. ‘Disgraceful!’ he shouted in his ear. ‘Turn your back!’ he ordered the blushing Katie Hooper. ‘NONSENSE!’ he bellowed when the Lieutenant tried to chatter something about gnurrs.

And, ‘Vot iss nonzense, soldier boy?’ enquired Papa Schimmelhorn from the doorway.

The Lieutenant pointed unsteadily at Colonel Pollard. ‘Gnurrs iss nonzense!’ he snickered. ‘He says so.’

‘Ha!’ Papa Schimmelhorn glared. ‘I show you, soldier boy!’

The Colonel erupted. ‘Soldier boy? SOLDIER BOY? *Stand at attention when I speak to you! ATTENTION, DAMN YOU!*’

Papa Schimmelhorn, of course, paid no attention whatsoever. He raised his secret weapon to his lips, and the first bars of ‘Come to the Church in the

Wildwood' moaned around the room.

'Mister Hanson!' raged the colonel. 'Arrest that man! Take that thing away from him! I'll prefer charges! I'll—'

At this point, the gnurrs came from the voodvork out.

It isn't easy to describe a gnurr. Can you imagine a mouse-coloured, mouse-sized creature shaped like a wild boar, but sort of *shimmery*? With thumbs fore and aft, and a pink, naked tail, and yellow eyes several sizes too large? And with three sets of sharp teeth in its face? You can? Well, that's about it—except that nobody has ever seen a gnurr. They don't come that way. When the gnurrs come from the voodvork out, they come *all over*—like lemmings, only more so—millions and millions of them.

And they come eating.

The gnurrs came from the voodvork out just as Papa Schimmelhorn reached '... the church in the vale'. They covered half the floor, and ate up half the carpet, before he finished 'No scene is so dear to my childhood'. Then they advanced on Colonel Pollard.

Mounting his desk, the Colonel started slashing around with his riding crop. Katie Hooper climbed a filing case, hoisted her skirt, and screamed. Lieutenant Hanson, secure in his nether nakedness, held his ground and guffawed insubordinately.

Papa Schimmelhorn stopped tootling to shout, 'Don't vorry, soldier boy!' He started in again, playing something quite unrecognisable—something that didn't sound like a tune at all.

Instantly, the gnurrs halted. They looked over their shoulders apprehensively. They swallowed the remains of the Colonel's chair cushion, shimmered brightly, made a queasy sort of creaking sound, and turning tail, vanished into the wainscoting.

Papa Schimmelhorn stared at the Colonel's boots, which were surprisingly intact, and muttered, 'Hmm-m, *zo!*' He leered appreciatively at Katie

Hooper, who promptly dropped her skirt. He thumped himself on the chest, and announced, 'They are vunderful, my gnurrs!'

'Wh—?' The Colonel showed evidence of profound psychic trauma. 'Where did they go?'

'Vere they came from,' replied Papa Schimmelhorn.

'Where's *that*?'

'It iss yesterday!'

'That—that's absurd!' The Colonel stumbled down and fell into his chair. 'They weren't here yesterday!'

Papa Schimmelhorn regarded him pityingly. 'Of courze nodt! They *vere* nodt here yesterday because yesterday vas then today. They *are* here yesterday, ven yesterday iss yesterday already. It iss different.'

Colonel Pollard cast an appealing glance at Lieutenant Hanson.

'Perhaps I can explain, sir,' said the Lieutenant, whose nervous system seemingly had benefited by the second visit of the gnurrs. 'May I make my report?'

'Yes, yes, certainly.' Colonel Pollard clutched gladly at the straw.

Lieutenant Hanson pulled up a chair, and—as Papa Schimmelhorn walked over to flirt with Katie—he began to talk in a low and very serious voice.

'It's absolutely incredible,' he said. 'All the routine tests show that he's at best a high grade moron. He quit school when he was eleven, served his apprenticeship, and worked as a clock-maker till he was in his fifties. After that, he was a janitor in the Geneva Institute of Higher Physics until just a few years ago. Then he came to America and got his present job. But it's the Geneva business that's important. They've been concentrating on extensions of Einstein's and Minkowski's work. He must have overheard a lot.'

‘But if he’s a moron—’ the Colonel had heard of Einstein, and knew that he was very deep indeed ‘—what good would it do him?’

‘That’s just the point, sir! He’s a moron on the conscious level, but subconsciously he’s a genius. Somehow, part of his mind absorbed the stuff, integrated it, and came up with this bassoon thing. It’s got a weird little L-shaped crystal in it, impinging on the reed, and when you blow the crystal vibrates. We don’t know why it works—but it sure does!’

‘You mean the—uh—the fourth dimension?’

‘Precisely. Though we’ve left yesterday behind, the gnurrs have not. They’re there *now*. When a day becomes our yesterday, it becomes their today.’

‘But—but how does he get rid of them?’

‘He says he plays the same tune backwards, and reverses the effect.’

Papa Schimmelhorn, who had been encouraging Katie Hooper to feel his biceps, turned round. ‘You wait!’ he laughed uproariously. ‘Soon, with my *gnurr-pfeife* I broadcast to the enemy! Ve vin the var!’

The Colonel shied. ‘The thing’s untried, unproven! It—er— requires further study—field service—acid test.’

‘We haven’t time, sir. We’d lose the element of surprise!’

‘We will make a regular report through channels,’ declared the Colonel. ‘It’s a damn’ machine, isn’t it? They’re unreliable. Always have been. It would be contrary to the principles of war.’

And then Lieutenant Hanson had an inspiration.’ But, sir,’ he argued, ‘we won’t be fighting with the *gnurr-pfeife*! The gnurrs will be our real weapon, and they’re not machines—they’re animals! The greatest generals used animals in war! The gnurrs aren’t interested in living creatures, but they’ll devour just about anything else—wool, cotton, leather, even plastics—and their numbers are simply astronomical. If I were you, I’d get through to the Secretary right away!’

For an instant, the Colonel hesitated—but only for an instant. ‘Hanson,’ he said decisively, ‘you’ve got a point there—a very sound point!’

And he reached for the telephone.

It took less than twenty-four hours to organise *Operation Gnurr*. The Secretary of Defence, after conferring with the President and the General Staff, personally rushed over to direct preliminary tests of Papa Schimmelhorn’s secret weapon. By nightfall, it was known that the gnurrs could:

a. Completely blanket everything within two hundred yards of the *gnurr-pfeife* in less than twenty seconds,

b. Strip an entire company of infantry, supported by chemical weapons, to the skin in one minute and eighteen seconds,

c. Ingest the contents of five Quartermaster warehouses in just over two and a half minutes,

and,

d. Come from the voodvork out when the *gnurr-pfeife* was played over a carefully shielded short-wave system.

It had also become apparent that there were only three effective ways to kill a gnurr—by shooting him to death, drenching him with liquid fire, or dropping an atomic bomb on him—and that there were entirely too many gnurrs for any of these methods to be worth a hoot.

By morning, Colonel Powhattan Fairfax Pollard—because he was the only senior officer who had ever seen a gnurr, and because animals were known to be right up his alley—had been made a lieutenant-general and given command of the operation. Lieutenant Hanson, as his aide, had suddenly found himself a major. Corporal Colliver had become a master-sergeant, presumably for being there when the manna fell. And Katie Hooper had had a brief but strenuous date with Papa Schimmelhorn.

Nobody was satisfied. Katie complained that Papa Schimmelhorn and his gnurrs had the same idea in mind, only his technique was different. Jerry Colliver, who had been dating Katie regularly, griped that the old buzzard with the muscles had sent his Hooper rating down to zero. Major Hanson had awakened to the possibility of somebody besides the enemy tuning in on the Papa Schimmelhorn Hour.

Even General Pollard was distressed—

‘I could overlook everything, Hanson,’ he said sourly, ‘except his calling me “soldier boy”. I won’t stand for it! The science of war cannot tolerate indiscipline. I spoke to him about it, and all he said was, “It iss all right, soldier boy. You can call me Papa.”’

Major Hanson disciplined his face, and said, ‘Well, why not call him Papa, sir? After all, it’s just such human touches as these that make history.’

‘Ah, yes—History.’ The General paused reflectively. ‘Hmm, perhaps so, perhaps so. They always called Napoleon “the little Corporal”.’

‘The thing that really bothers me, General, is how we’re going to get through without our own people listening in. I guess they must’ve worked out something on it, or they wouldn’t have scheduled the—the offensive for five o’clock. That’s only four hours off.’

‘Now that you mention it,’ said General Pollard, coming out of his reverie, ‘a memorandum did come through—Oh, Miss Hooper, bring me that memo from G-1, will you?—Thank you. Here it is. It seems that they have decided to—er—scramble the broadcast.’

‘*Scramble* it, sir?’

‘Yes, yes. And I’ve issued operational orders accordingly. You see, Intelligence reported several weeks ago that the enemy knows how to unscramble anything we transmit that way. When Mr—ah, “Papa” Schimmelhorn goes on the air, we will scramble him, but we will not transmit the code key to our own people. It is assumed that from five to fifteen enemy monitors will hear him. His playing of the tune will constitute

Phase One. When it is over, the microphones will be switched off, and he will play it backwards. That will be Phase Two, to dispose of such gnurrs as appear locally.'

'Seems sound enough.' Major Hanson frowned. 'And it's pretty smart, if everything goes right. But what if it doesn't? Hadn't we better have an ace up our sleeve?'

He frowned again. Then, as the General didn't seem to have any ideas on the subject, he went about his duties. He made a final inspection of the special sound-proof room in which Papa Schimmelhorn would tootle. He allocated its observation windows—one to the President, the Secretary, and General Pollard; one to the Chief of Staff, with his sea and air counterparts; another to Intelligence liaison; and the last to the functioning staff of Operation Gnurr, himself included. At ten minutes to five, when everything was ready, he was still worrying.

'Look here,' he whispered to Papa Schimmelhorn, as he escorted him to the fateful door. 'What are we going to do if your gnurrs really get loose here? You couldn't play them back into the voodvork in a month of Sundays!'

'Don't vorry, soldier boy!' Papa Schimmelhorn gave him a resounding slap on the back. 'I haff yet vun trick I do nodt tell you!'

And with that vague assurance, he closed the door behind him.

'*Ready!*' echoed Sergeant Colliver.

The tension mounted. The seconds ticked away. The General's hand reached for a sabre-hilt that wasn't there. At five exactly—

'*CHARGE!*' the General cried.

A red light flared above the microphones.

And Papa Schimmelhorn started tootling 'Come to the Church in the Wildwood'.

The gnurrs, of course, came from the voodvork out.

The gnurrs came from the voodvork out, and a hungry gleam was in their yellow eyes. They carpeted the floor. They started piling up. They surged against the massive legs of Papa Schimmelhorn, their tiny electric-razor sets of teeth going like all get out. His trousers vanished underneath the flood—his chequered coat, his tie, his collar, the fringes of his beard. And Papa Schimmelhorn, all undismayed, lifted his big bassoon out of gnurrs' way and tootled on. 'Come, come, come, come. Come to the church in the vildvood ...'

Of course, Major Hanson couldn't hear the *gnurr-pfeife*—but he had sung the song in Sunday school, and now the words resounded in his brain. Verse after verse, chorus after chorus—The awful thought struck him that Papa Schimmelhorn would be overwhelmed, sucked under, drowned in gnurrs ...

And then he heard the voice of General Pollard, no longer steady—

'R-ready, Phase Two?'

'R-ready!' replied Sergeant Colliver.

A green light flashed in front of Papa Schimmelhorn.

For a moment, nothing changed. Then the gnurrs hesitated. Apprehensively, they glanced over their hairy shoulders. They shimmered. They started to recede. Back, back, back they flowed, leaving Papa Schimmelhorn alone, triumphant, and naked as a jay-bird.

The door was opened, and he emerged—to be congratulated and reclothed, and (much to Sergeant Colliver's annoyance) to turn down a White House dinner invitation in favour of a date with Katie. The active phases of Operation Gnurr were over.

In far-away Bobovia, however, chaos reigned. Later it was learned that eleven inquisitive enemy monitors had unscrambled the tootle of the *gnurr-pfeife*, and that tidal waves of gnurrs had inundated the enemy's eleven major cities. By seven-fifteen, except for a few hysterical outlying stations, Bobovia was off the air. By eight, Bobovian military activity had ceased in every theatre. At twenty after ten, an astounded Press learned that the

surrender of Bobovia could be expected momentarily...The president had received a message from the Bobovian Marshalissimo, asking permission to fly to Washington with his Chief of Staff, the members of his Cabinet, and several relatives. And would His Excellency the President—the Marshalissimo had radioed—be so good as to have someone meet them at the airport with nineteen pairs of American trousers, new or used?

VE Day wasn't in it. Neither was VJ Day. As soon as the papers hit the streets—BOBOVIA SURRENDERS!—ATOMIC MICE DEVOUR ENEMY!—SWISS GENIUS' STRATEGY WINS WAR!—the crowds went wild. From Maine to Florida, from California to Cape Cod, the lights went on, sirens and bells and car horns resounded through the night, millions of throats were hoarse from singing 'Come to the Church in the Wildwood'.

Next day, after massed television cameras had let the entire nation in on the formal signing of the surrender pact, General Pollard and Papa Schimmelhorn were honoured at an impressive public ceremony.

Papa Schimmelhorn received a vote of thanks from both Houses of Congress. He was awarded academic honours by Harvard, Princeton, MIT, and a number of denominational colleges down in Texas. He spoke briefly about cuckoo-clocks, the gnurrs, and Katie Hooper.

General Pollard, having been presented with a variety of domestic and foreign decorations, spoke at some length on the use of animals in future warfare. He pointed out that the horse, of all animals, was best suited to normal military purposes, and he discussed in detail many of the battles and campaigns in which it had been tried and proven. He was just starting in on swords and lances when the abrupt arrival of Major Hanson cut short the whole affair.

Hanson raced up with sirens screaming. He left his escort of MPs and ran across the platform. Pale and panting, he reached the President—and, though he tried to whisper, his voice was loud enough to reach the General's ear. *'The—the gnurrs!'* he choked. *'They're in Los Angeles!'*

Instantly, the General rose to the occasion. 'Attention, please!' he shouted at the microphones. 'This ceremony is now over. You may consider yourselves

—er—ah—DISMISSED!’

Before his audience could react, he had joined the knot of men around the President, and Hanson was briefing them on what had happened. ‘It was a research unit! They’d worked out a de-scrambler—new stuff—better than the enemy’s. They didn’t know. Tried it out on Papa here. Cut a record. Played it back today! Los Angeles is overrun!’

There were long seconds of despairing silence. Then, ‘Gentlemen,’ said the President quietly, ‘we’re in the same boat as Bobovia.’

The General groaned.

But Papa Schimmelhorn, to everyone’s surprise, laughed boisterously. ‘Oh-ho-ho-ho! Don’t vorry, soldier boy! You trust old Papa Schimmelhorn. All ofer, in Bobovia, iss gnurrs! Ve haff them only in Los Angeles, vere it does nodt matter! Also, I haff a trick I did nodt tell!’ He winked a cunning wink. ‘Iss vun thing frightens gnurrs—’

‘In God’s name—*what?*’ exclaimed the Secretary.

‘Horzes,’ said Papa Schimmelhorn. ‘It iss the smell.’

‘Horses? Did you say *horses?*’ The General pawed the ground. His eyes flashed fire. ‘CAVALRY!’ he thundered. ‘We must have CAVALRY!’

No time was wasted. Within the hour, Lieutenant-General Powhattan Fairfax Pollard, the only senior cavalry officer who knew anything about gnurrs, was promoted to the rank of General of the Armies, and given supreme command. Major Hanson became a brigadier, a change of status which left him slightly dazed. Sergeant Colliver received his warrant.

General Pollard took immediate and decisive action. The entire Air Force budget for the year was commandeered. Anything even remotely resembling a horse, saddle, bridle, or bale of hay was shipped westward in requisitioned trains and trucks. Former cavalry officers and non-coms, ordered to instant duty regardless of age and wear-and-tear, were flown by disgruntled pilots to assembly points in Oregon, Nevada and Arizona. Anybody and everybody

who had ever so much as seen a horse was drafted into service. Mexico sent over several regiments on a lend-lease basis.

The Press had a field day. NUDE HOLLYWOOD STARS FIGHT GNURRS! headlined many a full front page of photographs. *Life* devoted a special issue to General of the Armies Pollard, Jeb Stuart, Marshal Ney, Belisarius, the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, and AR 50-45, School of the Soldier Mounted Without Arms. The *Journal-American* reported, on reliable authority, that the ghost of General Custer had been observed entering the Officers' Club at Fort Riley, Kansas.

On the sixth day, General Pollard had ready in the field the largest cavalry force in all recorded history. Its discipline and appearance left much to be desired. Its horsemanship was, to say the very least, uneven. Still, its morale was high, and—

‘Never again,’ declared the General to correspondents who interviewed him at his headquarters in Phoenix, ‘must we let politicians and long-haired theorists persuade us to abandon the time-tried principles of war, and trust our national destiny to—to *gadgets*.’

Drawing his sabre, the General indicated his operations map. ‘Our strategy is simple,’ he announced. ‘The gnurr forces have by-passed the Mohave Desert in the south, and are invading Arizona. In Nevada, they have concentrated against Reno and Virginia City. Their main offensive, however, appears to be aimed at the Oregon border. As you know, I have more than two million mounted men at my disposal—some three hundred divisions. In one hour, they will move forward. We will force the gnurrs to retreat in three main groups—in the south, in the centre, in the north. Then, when the terrain they hold has been sufficiently restricted, Papa—er, that is, Mister—Schimmelhorn will play his instrument over mobile public address systems.’

With that, the General indicated that the interview was at an end, and, mounting a splendid bay gelding presented to him by the citizens of Louisville, rode off to emplane for the theatre of operations.

Needless to say, his conduct of the War Against the Gnurrs showed the highest degree of initiative and energy, and a perfect grasp of the immutable

principles of strategy and tactics. Even though certain envious elements in the Pentagon afterwards referred to the campaign as ‘Polly’s Round-up’, the fact remained that he was able to achieve total victory in five weeks—months before Bobovia even thought of promising its Five Year Plan for retrousing its population. Inexorably, the terror-stricken gnurrs were driven back. Their queasy creaking could be heard for miles. At night, their shimmering lighted up the sky. In the south, where their deployment had been confined by deserts, three tootlings in reverse sufficed to bring about their downfall. In the centre, where the action was heavier than anticipated, seventeen were needed. In the north, a dozen were required to do the trick. In each instance, the sound was carried over an area of several hundred square miles by huge loudspeaker units mounted in escort wagons or carried in packs. Innumerable cases of personal heroism were recorded—and Jerry Colliver, after having four pairs of breeches shot out from under him, was personally commissioned in the field by General Pollard.

Naturally, a few gnurrs made their escape—but the felines of the state, who had been mewling with frustration, made short work of them. As for the numerous instances of indiscipline which occurred as the victorious troops passed through the quite literally denuded towns, these were soon forgiven and forgotten by the joyous populace.

Secretly, to avoid the rough enthusiasm of admiring throngs, General Pollard and Papa Schimmelhorn flew back to Washington—and three full regiments with drawn sabres were needed to clear a way for them. Finally, though, they reached the Pentagon. They walked towards the General’s office arm in arm, and then at the door they paused for a moment or two.

‘Papa,’ said General Pollard, pointing at the *gnurr-pfeife* with awe, ‘we have made History! And, by God, we’ll make more of it!’

‘Ja!’ said Papa Schimmelhorn, with an enormous wink. ‘But tonight, soldier boy, ve vill make vhoopee! I haff a date with Katie. For you she has a girl friend.’

General Pollard hesitated. ‘Wouldn’t it—wouldn’t it be bad for— er— discipline?’

‘Don’t vorry, soldier boy! Ve don’t tell anybody!’ laughed Papa Schimmelhorn—and threw the door open.

There stood the General’s desk. There, at its side, stood Brigadier-General Hanson, looking worried. Against one wall stood Lieutenant Jerry Colliver, smirking loathsomely, with a possessive arm around Katie Hooper’s waist. And in the General’s chair sat a very stiff old lady, in a very stiff black dress, tapping a very stiff umbrella on the blotting pad.

As soon as she saw Papa Schimmelhorn, she stopped tapping and pointed the umbrella at him. ‘*So!*’ she hissed. ‘You think you get away? To spoil Cousin Anton’s beaudtiful bassoon, and play with mices, and passes at females soldier-girls make?’

She turned to Katie Hooper, and they exchanged a feminine glance of triumph and understanding. ‘Iss lucky that you phone, so I find out,’ she said. ‘You are nice girl. You can see under sheep’s clothings.’

She rose. As Katie blushed, she strode across the room, and grabbed the *gnurr-pfeife* from Papa Schimmelhorn. Before anyone could stop her, she stripped it of its reed—and ground the L-shaped crystal underfoot. ‘Now,’ she exclaimed, ‘iss no more gnurrs and people-vithout-trousers-monkey-shines!’

While General Pollard stared in blank amazement and Jerry Colliver snickered gloatingly, she took poor Papa Schimmelhorn firmly by the ear. ‘So ve go home!’ she ordered, steering him for the door. ‘Vere iss no soldier girls, and the house needs painting!’

Looking crestfallen, Papa Schimmelhorn went without resistance. ‘Gootbye!’ he called unhappily. ‘I must go home vith Mama.’

But as he passed by General Pollard, he winked his usual wink. ‘Don’t vorry, soldier boy!’ he whispered. ‘I get away again—I am a chenius!’

CAPTAIN WYXTPHLL'S FLYING SAUCER

Arthur C. Clarke

*The beginning of the age of the 'flying saucer', or UFO, can be dated to 24 June, 1947, when an American pilot, Kenneth Arnold, saw in the sky above Mount Baker in Washington what he described as a formation of very bright lights that 'flew like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water'. His detailed report of this strange encounter, which he later expanded into a book, *The Coming of the Saucers* (1952), launched what has since become a worldwide obsession with flying saucers, generating thousands of reports of alleged sightings, hundreds of photographs and a veritable library of books. The interest in flying saucers has been further enhanced by a string of movies following in the wake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), which is credited with helping to popularise flying saucers and especially the idea that they are flown by super-intelligent aliens.*

*There have been numerous works of fiction, too, the first of which was *Star of III Omen* by Dennis Wheatley, published in 1952. Several authors of fantasy fiction have written stories about UFOs, among them Henry Kuttner ('Or Else', 1953), Theodore Sturgeon ('A Saucer of Loneliness', 1953) and Fritz Leiber with his excellent novel of an alien visitor to Earth, *The Wanderer* (1964). Probably the first writer to tackle the subject in a short story was Arthur C. Clarke, in the humour-packed tale of 'Captain Wyxtpthll's Flying Saucer' which appeared in *Marvel Science Stories*, April 1951—an issue somewhat notorious for having carried a lengthy for-and-against debate on dianetics with an article by L. Ron Hubbard, 'Homo Superior—Here We Come!'*

*Somerset-born Arthur Charles Clarke (1917—) was an active fan of SF even before he became one of the grand masters of the genre, with his novels selling by the million and his space predictions coming true one after another. His fame was assured with the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) which Stanley Kubrick developed from his short story 'The Sentinel'. Although the main body of Clarke's work has been devoted to themes of mystical transcendence and learning from alien intelligence, his*

sense of humour has been evident in short stories throughout his career—indeed one of his earliest collections, Tales From the White Hart, 1957, is full of comic moments, while later volumes like The Nine Billion Names of God (1967) and The Wind From the Sun (1972) contain several stories with hilarious last-line twists. His wit is at its most mischievous in the following story of the abduction of two incompatible earthlings by a UFO and the unexpected consequences...

* * * *

The Flying Saucer came down vertically through the clouds, braked to a halt about fifty feet from the ground, and settled with a considerable bump on a patch of heather-strewn moorland.

‘That,’ said Captain Wyxtpthll, ‘was a lousy landing.’ He did not, of course, use precisely these words: to human ears his remarks would have sounded rather like the clucking of an angry hen. Master Pilot Krtclugg unwound three of his tentacles from the control panel, stretched all four of his legs, and relaxed comfortably.

‘Not my fault the automatics have packed up again,’ he grumbled. ‘But what do you expect with a ship that should have been scrapped five thousand years ago? If those cheese-paring form-fillers back at Base Planet—’

‘Oh, all right! We’re down in one piece, which is more than I expected. Tell Crysteel and Danstor to come in here. I want a word with them before they go.’

Crysteel and Danstor were, very obviously, of a different species from the rest of the crew. They had only one pair of legs and arms, no eyes at the back of the head, and other physical deficiencies which their colleagues did their best to overlook. These very defects, however, had made them the obvious choice for this particular mission, for it had needed only a minimum of disguise to let them pass as human beings under all but the closest scrutiny.

‘Now you’re perfectly sure,’ said the Captain, ‘that you understand your instructions?’

‘Of course,’ replied Crysteel, slightly huffed. ‘This isn’t the first time I’ve made contact with a primitive race. My training in anthropology...’

‘Good. And the language?’

‘Well, that’s Danstor’s business, but I can speak it reasonably fluently now. It’s a very simple language, and after all we’ve been studying their radio programmes for a couple of years.’

‘Any other points before you go?’

‘Er—there’s just one matter.’ Crysteel hesitated slightly. ‘It’s quite obvious from their broadcasts that the social system is very primitive, and that crime and lawlessness are widespread. Many of the wealthier citizens have to use what are called “detectives” or “special agents” to protect their lives and property. Now we know it’s against regulations, but we were wondering ...’

‘What?’

‘Well, we’d feel much safer if we could take a couple of Mark III disrupters with us.’

‘Not on your life! I’d be court-martialled if they heard about it at the Base. Suppose you killed some of the natives—then I’d have the Bureau of Interstellar Politics, the Aborigines Conservancy Board, and half a dozen others after me.’

‘There’d be just as much trouble if we got killed,’ Crysteel pointed out with considerable emotion. ‘After all, you’re responsible for our safety. Remember that radio play I was telling you about? It described a typical household—but there were two murders in the first half hour!’

‘Oh, very well. But only a Mark II—we don’t want you to do too much damage if there is trouble.’

‘Thanks a lot: that’s a great relief. I’ll report every thirty minutes as arranged. We shouldn’t be gone more than a couple of hours.’

Captain Wyxtpthll watched them disappear over the brow of the hill. He sighed deeply.

‘Why,’ he said, ‘of all the people in the ship did it have to be *those* two?’

‘It couldn’t be helped,’ answered the pilot. ‘All these primitive races are terrified of anything strange. If they saw *us* coming, there’d be general panic and before we knew where we were the bombs would be falling on top of us. You just can’t rush these things.’

Captain Wyxtpthll was absentmindedly making a cat’s cradle out of his tentacles in the way he did when he was worried.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘if they don’t come back I can always go away and report the place dangerous.’ He brightened considerably. ‘Yes, that would save a lot of trouble.’

‘And waste all the months we’ve spent studying it?’ said the pilot, scandalised. ‘They won’t be wasted,’ replied the captain, unravelling himself with a flick that no human eye could have followed. ‘Our report will be useful for the next survey ship. I’ll suggest that we make another visit in—oh, let’s say five thousand years. By then the place may be civilised—though frankly, I doubt it.’

Samuel Higginsbotham was settling down to a snack of cheese and cider when he saw the two figures approaching along the lane. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, put the bottle carefully down beside his hedge-trimming tools, and stared with mild surprise at the couple as they came into range.

‘Mornin’,’ he said cheerfully between mouthfuls of cheese.

The strangers paused. One was surreptitiously ruffling through a small book which, if Sam only knew, was packed with such common phrases and expressions as: ‘Before the weather forecast, here is a gale warning’, ‘Stick ‘em up—I’ve got you covered!’, and ‘Calling all cars!’ Danstor, who had no need for these aids to memory, replied promptly enough.

‘Good morning, my man,’ he said in his best BBC accent. ‘Could you direct us to the nearest hamlet, village, small town or other such civilised community?’

‘Eh?’ said Sam. He peered suspiciously at the strangers, aware for the first time that there was something very odd about their clothes. One did not, he realised dimly, normally wear a roll-top sweater with a smart pin-stripe suit of the pattern fancied by city gents. And the fellow who was still fussing with the little book was actually wearing full evening dress which would have been faultless apart from the lurid green and red tie, the hob-nailed boots and the cloth cap. Crysteel and Danstor had done their best, but they had seen too many television plays. When one considers that they had no other source of information, their sartorial aberrations were at least understandable.

Sam scratched his head. Furriners, I suppose, he told himself. Not even the townsfolk got themselves up like this.

He pointed down the road and gave them explicit directions in an accent so broad that no one residing outside the range of the BBC’s West Regional transmitter could have understood more than one word in three. Crysteel and Danstor, whose home planet was so far away that Marconi’s first signals couldn’t possibly have reached it yet, did even worse than this. But they managed to get the general idea and retired in good order, both wondering if their knowledge of English was as good as they had believed.

So came and passed, quite uneventfully and without record in the history books, the first meeting between humanity and beings from Outside.

‘I suppose,’ said Danstor thoughtfully, but without much conviction, ‘that he wouldn’t have done? It would have saved us a lot of trouble.’

‘I’m afraid not. Judging by his clothes, and the work he was obviously engaged upon, he could not have been a very intelligent or valuable citizen. I doubt if he could even have understood who we were.’

‘Here’s another one!’ said Danstor, pointing ahead.

‘Don’t make sudden movements that might cause alarm. Just walk along naturally, and let him speak first.’

The man ahead strode purposefully towards them, showed not the slightest signs of recognition, and before they had recovered was already disappearing into the distance.

‘Well!’ said Danstor.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ replied Crysteel philosophically. ‘He probably wouldn’t have been any use either.’

‘That’s no excuse for bad manners!’

They gazed with some indignation at the retreating back of Professor Fitzsimmons as, wearing his oldest hiking outfit and engrossed in a difficult piece of atomic theory, he dwindled down the lane. For the first time, Crysteel began to suspect uneasily that it might not be as simple to make contact as he had optimistically believed.

Little Milton was a typical English village, nestling at the foot of the hills whose higher slopes now concealed so portentous a secret. There were very few people about on this summer morning, for the men were already at work and the womenfolk were still tidying up after the exhausting task of getting their lords and masters safely out of the way. Consequently Crysteel and Danstor had almost reached the centre of the village before their first encounter, which happened to be with the village postman, cycling back to the office after completing his rounds. He was in a very bad temper, having had to deliver a penny postcard to Dodgson’s farm, a couple of miles off his normal route. In addition, the weekly parcel of laundry which Gunner Evans sent home to his doting mother had been a lot heavier than usual: as well it might since it contained four tins of bully beef pinched from the cook-house.

‘Excuse me,’ said Danstor politely.

‘Can’t stop,’ said the postman, in no mood for casual conversation. ‘Got another round to do.’ Then he was gone.

‘This is really the limit!’ protested Danstor. ‘Are they *all* going to be like this?’

‘You’ve simply got to be patient,’ said Crysteel. ‘Remember their customs are quite different from ours—it may take some time to gain their confidence. I’ve had this sort of trouble with primitive races before. Every anthropologist has to get used to it.’

‘Hmm,’ said Danstor. ‘I suggest that we call at some of their houses. Then they won’t be able to run away.’

‘Very well,’ agreed Crysteel doubtfully. ‘But avoid anything that looks like a religious shrine, otherwise we may get into trouble.’

Old Widow Tomkins’ council-house could hardly have been mistaken, even by the most experienced of explorers, for such an object. The old lady was agreeably excited to see two gentlemen standing on her doorstep, and noticed nothing at all odd about their clothes. Visions of unexpected legacies, of newspaper reporters asking about her 100th birthday (she was really only 95, but had managed to keep it dark) flashed through her mind. She picked up the slate she kept hanging by the door and went gaily forth to greet her visitors.

‘You’ll have to write it down,’ she simpered, holding out the slate. ‘I’ve been deaf this last twenty years.’

Crysteel and Danstor looked at each other in dismay. This was a completely unexpected snag, for the only written characters they had ever seen were television programme announcements, and they had never fully deciphered those. But Danstor, who had an almost photographic memory, rose to the occasion. Holding the chalk very awkwardly, he wrote a sentence which, he had reason to believe, was in common use during such breakdowns in communication.

As her mysterious visitors walked sadly away, old Mrs Tomkins stared in baffled bewilderment at the marks on her slate. It was some time before she deciphered the characters—Danstor had made several mistakes—and even then she was little the wiser.

TRANSMISSIONS WILL BE RESUMED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

It was the best that Danstor could do: but the old lady never did get to the bottom of it.

They were a little luckier at the next house they tried. The door was answered by a young lady whose vocabulary consisted largely of giggles, and who eventually broke down completely and slammed the door in their faces. As they listened to the muffled, hysterical laughter, Crysteel and Danstor began to suspect with sinking hearts, that their disguise as normal human beings was not as effective as they had intended.

At Number 3, on the other hand, Mrs Smith was only too willing to talk—at 120 words to the minute in an accent as impenetrable as Sam Higginsbotham's. Danstor made his apologies as soon as he could get in a word edgeways, and moved on.

'Doesn't *anyone* talk as they do on the radio?' he lamented. 'How do they understand their own programmes if they all speak like this?'

'I think we must have landed in the wrong place,' said Crysteel, even his optimism beginning to fail. It sagged still further when he had been mistaken, in swift succession, for a Gallup Poll investigator, the prospective Conservative candidate, a vacuum cleaner salesman, and a dealer from the local black market.

At the sixth or seventh attempt they ran out of housewives. The door was opened by a gangling youth who clutched in one clammy paw an object which at once hypnotised the visitors. It was a magazine whose cover displayed a giant rocket climbing upwards from a crater-studded planet which, whatever it might be, was obviously not the Earth. Across the background were the words: 'Staggering Stories of Pseudo-Science. Price 1s 3d.'

Crysteel looked at Danstor with a 'Do you think what I think?' expression which the other returned. Here at last, surely, was someone who could understand them. His spirits mounting, Danstor addressed the youngster.

‘I think you can help us,’ he said politely. ‘We find it very difficult to make ourselves understood here. You see, we’ve just landed on this planet from space and we want to get in touch with your government.’

‘Oh,’ said Jimmy Williams, not yet fully returned to Earth from his vicarious adventures among the outer moons of Saturn. ‘Where’s your spaceship?’

‘It’s up in the hills: we didn’t want to frighten anyone.’

‘Is it a rocket?’

‘Good gracious no. They’ve been obsolete for thousands of years.’

‘Then how does it work? Does it use atomic power?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Danstor, who was pretty shaky on physics. ‘Is there any other kind of power?’

‘This is getting us nowhere,’ said Crysteel, impatient for once. ‘We’ve got to ask *him* questions. Try and find where there are some officials we can meet.’

Before Danstor could answer, a stentorian voice came from inside the house.

‘Jimmy! Who’s there?’

‘Two...men,’ said Jimmy, a little doubtfully. ‘At least, they look like men. They’ve come from Mars. I always said that was going to happen.’

There was the sound of ponderous movements, and a lady of elephantine bulk and ferocious mien appeared from the gloom. She glared at the strangers, looked at the magazine Jimmy was carrying, and summed up the situation.

‘You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!’ she cried, rounding on Crysteel and Danstor. ‘It’s bad enough having a good-for-nothing son in the house who wastes all his time reading this rubbish, without grown men coming along putting more ideas into his head. Men from Mars, indeed! I suppose you’ve come in one of those flying saucers!’

‘But I never mentioned Mars—’ protested Danstor feebly.

Slam! From behind the door came the sound of violent altercation, the unmistakable noise of tearing paper, and a wail of anguish. And that was that.

‘Well,’ said Danstor at last. ‘What do we try next? And why did he say we came from Mars? That isn’t even the nearest planet, if I remember correctly.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Crysteel. ‘But I suppose it’s natural for them to assume that we come from some close planet. They’re going to have a shock when they find the truth. Mars, indeed! That’s even worse than here, from the reports I’ve seen.’ He was obviously beginning to lose some of his scientific detachment.

‘Let’s leave the houses for a while,’ said Danstor. ‘There must be some more people outside.’

This statement proved to be perfectly true, for they had not gone much further before they found themselves surrounded by small boys making incomprehensible but obviously rude remarks.

‘Should we try and placate them with gifts?’ said Danstor anxiously. ‘That usually works among more backward races.’

‘Well, have you brought any?’

‘No, I thought you—’

Before Danstor could finish, their tormenters took to their heels and disappeared down a side street. Coming along the road was a majestic figure in a blue uniform.

Crysteel’s eyes lit up.

‘A policeman!’ he said. ‘Probably going to investigate a murder somewhere. But perhaps he’ll spare us a minute,’ he added, not very hopefully.

PC Hinks eyed the strangers with some astonishment but he managed to keep his feelings out of his voice.

‘Hello, gents. Looking for anything?’

‘As a matter of fact, yes,’ said Danstor in his friendliest and most soothing tone of voice. ‘Perhaps you can help us. You see, we’ve just landed on this planet and want to make contact with the authorities.’

‘Eh?’ said PC Hinks, startled. There was a long pause—though not too long, for PC Hinks was a bright young man who had no intention of remaining a village constable all his life. ‘So you’ve just landed, have you? In a spaceship, I suppose?’

‘That’s right,’ said Danstor, immensely relieved at the absence of the incredulity, or even violence, which such announcements all too often provoked on the more primitive planets.

‘Well, well!’ said PC Hinks, in tones which he hoped would inspire confidence and feelings of amity. (Not that it mattered much if they both became violent—they seemed a pretty skinny pair.) ‘Just tell me what you want, and I’ll see what we can do about it.’

‘I’m so glad,’ said Danstor. ‘You see, we’ve landed in this rather remote spot because we don’t want to create a panic. It would be best to keep our presence known to as few people as possible until we have contacted your government.’

‘I quite understand,’ replied PC Hinks, glancing round hastily to see if there was anyone through whom he could send a message to his sergeant. ‘And what do you propose to do then?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t discuss our long-term policy with regard to Earth,’ said Danstor cagily. ‘All I can say is that this section of the Universe is being surveyed and opened up for development—and we’re quite sure we can help you in many ways.’

‘That’s very nice of you,’ said PC Hinks heartily. ‘I think the best thing is for you to come along to the station with me so that we can put through a call to the Prime Minister.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said Danstor, full of gratitude. They walked trustingly beside PC Hinks, despite his slight tendency to keep behind them,

until they reached the village police station.

‘This way, gents,’ said PC Hinks politely, ushering them into a room which was really rather poorly lit and not at all well furnished, even by the somewhat primitive standards they had expected. Before they could fully take in their surroundings, there was a ‘click’ and they found themselves separated from their guide by a large door composed entirely of iron bars.

‘Now don’t worry,’ said PC Hinks. ‘Everything will be quite all right. I’ll be back in a minute.’

Crysteel and Danstor gazed at each other with a wild surmise that rapidly deepened to a dreadful certainty.

‘We’re locked in!’

‘This is a prison!’

‘Now what are we going to do?’

‘I don’t know if you chaps understand English,’ said a languid voice from the gloom, ‘but you might let a fellow sleep in peace.’

For the first time, the two prisoners saw that they were not alone. Lying on a bed in the corner of the cell was a somewhat dilapidated young man, who gazed at them blearily out of one resentful eye.

‘My goodness!’ said Danstor nervously. ‘Do you suppose he’s a dangerous criminal?’

‘He doesn’t look very dangerous at the moment,’ said Crysteel, with more accuracy than he guessed.

‘What are *you* in for, anyway?’ asked the stranger, sitting up unsteadily. ‘You look as if you’ve been to a fancy-dress party. Oh, my poor head!’ He collapsed again into the prone position.

‘Fancy locking up anyone as ill as this!’ said Danstor, who was a kind-hearted individual. Then he continued, in English: ‘I don’t know why we’re

here. We just told the policeman who we were and where we came from—and this is what's happened.'

'Well, who are you?'

'We've just landed—'

'Oh, there's no point in going through all that again,' interrupted Crysteel. 'We'll never get anyone to believe us.'

'Hey!' said the stranger, sitting up once more. 'What language is that you're speaking? I know a few, but I've never heard anything like that.'

'Oh, all right,' Crysteel said to Danstor. 'You might as well tell him. There's nothing else to do until that policeman comes back anyway.'

At this moment, PC Hinks was engaged in earnest conversation with the superintendent of the local mental home, who insisted stoutly that all his patients were present. However, a careful check was promised and he'd call back later.

Wondering if the whole thing was a practical joke, PC Hinks put the receiver down and quietly made his way to the cells. The three prisoners seemed to be engaged in friendly conversation, so he tiptoed away again. It would do them all good to have a chance to cool down. He rubbed his eye tenderly as he remembered what a battle it had been to get Mr Graham into the cell during the small hours of the morning.

That young man was now reasonably sober after the night's celebrations, which he did not in the least regret. (It was, after all, quite an occasion when your degree came through and you found you'd made Cum Laude.) But he began to fear that he was still under the influence as Danstor unfolded his tale and waited, not expecting to be believed.

In these circumstances, thought Graham, the best thing to do was to behave as matter-of-factly as possible until the hallucinations got fed up and went away.

‘If you really have a spaceship in the hills,’ he remarked, ‘surely you can get in touch with it and ask someone to come and rescue you?’

‘We want to handle this ourselves,’ said Crysteel with dignity. ‘Besides, you don’t know our captain.’

They sounded very convincing, thought Graham: the whole story hung together remarkably well. And yet—

‘It’s a bit hard for me to believe that you can build interstellar spaceships, but can’t get out of a miserable village police station.’

Danstor looked at Crysteel, who shuffled uncomfortably.

‘We could get out easily enough,’ said the anthropologist. ‘But we don’t want to use violent means unless it’s absolutely essential. You’ve no idea of the trouble it causes, and the reports we might have to fill in. Besides, if we did get out, I suppose your Flying Squad would catch us before we got back to the ship.’

‘Not in Little Milton,’ grinned Graham. ‘Especially if we could get across to the White Hart without being stopped. My car is over there.’

‘Oh,’ said Danstor, his spirits suddenly reviving. He turned to his companion and a lively discussion followed. Then, very gingerly, he produced a small black cylinder from an inner pocket, handling it with much the same confidence as a nervous spinster holding a loaded gun for the first time. Simultaneously, Crysteel retired with some speed to the far corner of the cell.

It was at this precise moment that Graham knew, with a sudden icy certainty, that he was stone sober and that the story he had been listening to was nothing less than the truth.

There was no fuss or bother, no flurry of electric sparks or coloured rays—but a section of the wall three feet across dissolved quietly and collapsed into a little pyramid of sand. The sunlight came streaming into the cell as, with a great sigh of relief, Danstor put his mysterious weapon away.

‘Well, come on,’ he urged Graham. ‘We’re waiting for you.’

There were no signs of pursuit, for PC Hinks was still arguing on the phone, and it would be some minutes yet before that bright young man returned to the cells and received the biggest shock of his official career. No one at the White Hart was particularly surprised to see Graham again: they all knew where and how he had spent the night, and expressed the hope that the local Bench would deal leniently with him when his case came up.

With grave misgivings, Crysteel and Danstor climbed into the back Of the incredibly ramshackle Bentley which Graham affectionately addressed as ‘Rose’. But there was nothing wrong with the engine under the rusty bonnet, and soon they were roaring out of Little Milton at fifty miles an hour. It was a striking demonstration of the relativity of speed, for Crysteel and Danstor, who had spent the last few years travelling tranquilly through space at several million miles a second, had never been so scared in their lives. When Crysteel had recovered his breath he pulled out his little portable transmitter and called the ship.

‘We’re on the way back,’ he shouted above the roar of the wind. ‘We’ve got a fairly intelligent human being with us. Expect us in— whoops!—I’m sorry—we just went over a bridge—about ten minutes. What was that? No, of course not. We didn’t have the slightest trouble. Everything went perfectly smoothly. *Goodbye.*’

Graham looked back only once to see how his passengers were faring. The sight was rather unsettling, for their ears and hair (which had not been glued on very firmly) had blown away and their real selves were beginning to emerge. Graham began to suspect, with some discomfort, that his new acquaintances also lacked noses. Oh well, one could grow used to anything with practice. He was going to have plenty of that in the years ahead.

The rest, of course, you all know; but the full story of the first landing on Earth, and of the peculiar circumstances under which Ambassador Graham became humanity’s representative to the universe at large, has never before been recounted. We extracted the main details, with a good deal of persuasion, from Crysteel and Danstor themselves, while we were working in the Department of Extra-terrestrial affairs. It was understandable, in view

of their success on Earth, that they should have been selected by their superiors to make the first contact with our mysterious and secretive neighbours, the Martians. It is also understandable, in the light of the above evidence, that Crysteel and Danstor were so reluctant to embark on this later mission—and we are not really very surprised that nothing has ever been heard of them since.

PLAYBOY AND THE SLIME GOD

Isaac Asimov

Over the years, the majority of Science Fiction writers have expressed disbelief in flying saucers with stories either openly hostile to UFOs or else poking fun at the idea of their being alien craft. At the forefront of the sceptics was Isaac Asimov, for years one of the most influential figures in contemporary SF, who wrote a number of articles denouncing what he called 'saucer mania'. Among nearly 500 titles which he produced during his amazingly prolific lifetime are several short stories in which his attitude is very evident, most couched in a typically humorous vein. 'Playboy and the Slime God', which he wrote for Amazing Stories in 1960, falls into this category, and there is an interesting story behind its creation. The tale had been inspired by an article in Playboy magazine, entitled 'Girls for the Slime God', which bemoaned the fact that SF magazines of the time seemed to abjure sex and no longer carried the once-popular stories of bug-eyed monsters 'going around ripping the clothes off earth-girls exposing their ivory bosoms'. The article caught the eye of the editor of Amazing Stories, the enterprising and perceptive Cele Goldsmith, who felt it deserved a riposte. And so, as she announced in a preface to the first publication of 'Playboy and the Slime God' in the November issue, We commissioned one of SF's most sex-appealing writers to create a story especially for the insatiable Playboy, and to prove to him that SF has not forgotten that S-X is the most important thing in the Universe.'

Isaac Asimov (1920—1992) was born in Smolensk in the former Soviet Union, but emigrated with his parents to New York as a child and soon displayed a precocious intelligence. Discovering SF in the pages of the pulp magazines of the Thirties, he launched his own career with a landmark series of Space Operas about a million-world empire, the 'Foundation Trilogy' (which became a quartet with Forward the Foundation completed just before his death). Later he ensured his lasting fame by devising what has become known as the 'Law of Robotics',

developed in a group of stories published as I, Robot (1950) and Rest of the Robots (1964).

In later life Asimov turned more and more to non-fiction in which he explained scientific developments and space technology to the lay reader in language that was simple and lucid. His love of humour never diminished, however, as The Isaac Asimov Treasury of Humour (1971) and Asimov Laughs Again (1992) bear eloquent witness—not forgetting the following playful spoof on the world’s most famous girlie magazine.

* * * *

‘But these are two species,’ said Captain Garm, peering closely at the creatures that had been brought up from the planet below. His optic organs adjusted focus to maximum sharpness, bulging outwards as they did so. The colour patch above them gleamed in quick flashes.

Botax felt warmly comfortable to be following colour-changes once again, after months in a spy cell on the planet, trying to make sense out of the modulated sound waves emitted by the natives. Communication by flash was almost like being home in the far-off Perseus arm of the Galaxy. ‘Not two species,’ he said, ‘but two forms of one species.’

‘Nonsense, they look quite different. Vaguely Perse-like, thank the Entity, and not as disgusting in appearance as so many out-forms are. Reasonable shape, recognisable limbs. But no colour-patch. Can they speak?’

‘Yes, Captain Garm,’ Botax indulged in a discreetly disapproving prismatic interlude. ‘The details are in my report. These creatures form sound waves by way of throat and mouth, something like complicated coughing. I have learned to do it myself.’ He was quietly proud. ‘It is very difficult.’

‘It must be stomach-turning. Well, that accounts for their flat, unextensible eyes. Not to speak by colour makes eyes largely useless. Meanwhile, how can you insist these are a single species? The one on the left is smaller and has longer tendrils, or whatever it is, and seems differently proportioned. It bulges where this other does not. Are they alive?’

‘Alive but not at the moment conscious, Captain. They have been psychotreated to repress fright in order that they might be studied easily.’

‘But are they worth study? We are behind our schedule and have at least five worlds of greater moment than this one to check and explore. Maintaining a time-stasis unit is expensive and I would like to return them and go on—’

But Botax’s moist spindly body was fairly vibrating with anxiety. His tubular tongue flicked out and curved up and over his flat nose, while his eyes sucked inward. His splayed three-fingered hand, made a gesture of negation as his speech went almost entirely into the deep red.

‘Entity save us, Captain, for no world is of greater moment to us than this one. We may be facing a supreme crisis. These creatures could be the most dangerous life-forms in the Galaxy, Captain, just *because* there are two forms.’

‘I don’t follow you.’

‘Captain, it has been my job to study this planet, and it has been most difficult, for it is unique. It is so unique that I can scarcely comprehend its facets. For instance, almost all life on the planet consists of species in two forms. There are no words to describe it, no concepts even. I can only speak of them as first form and second form. If I may use their sounds, the little one is called “female”, and the big one, here, “male”, so the creatures themselves are aware of the difference.’

Garm winced, ‘What a disgusting means of communication.’

‘And, Captain, in order to bring forth young, the two forms must cooperate.’

The Captain, who had bent forward to examine the specimens closely with an expression compounded of interest and revulsion, straightened at once. ‘Cooperate? What nonsense is this? There is no more fundamental attribute of life than that each living creature bring forth its young in innermost communication with itself. What else makes life worth living?’

‘The one form does bring forth life but the other form must cooperate.’

‘How?’

‘That has been difficult to determine. It is something very private and in my search through the available forms of literature I could find no exact and explicit description. But I have been able to make reasonable deductions.’

Garm shook his head. ‘Ridiculous. Budding is the holiest, most private function in the world. On tens of thousands of worlds it is the same. As the great photobard, Levuline, said, “In budding time, in budding time, in sweet, delightful budding time; when ...”’

‘Captain, you don’t understand. This cooperation between forms brings about somehow (and I am not certain exactly how) a mixture and recombination of genes. It is a device by which in every generation, new combinations of characteristics are brought into existence. Variations are multiplied; mutated genes hastened into expression almost at once where under the usual budding system, millennia might pass first.’

‘Are you trying to tell me that the genes from one individual can be combined with those of another? Do you know how completely ridiculous that is in the light of all the principles of cellular physiology?’

‘It must be so,’ said Botax nervously under the other’s pop-eyed glare. ‘Evolution *is* hastened. This planet is a riot of species. There are supposed to be a million and a quarter different species of creatures.’

‘A dozen and a quarter more likely. Don’t accept too completely what you read in the native literature.’

‘I’ve seen dozens of radically different species myself in just a small area. I tell you, Captain, give these creatures a short space of time and they will mutate into intellects powerful enough to overtake us and rule the Galaxy.’

‘Prove that this cooperation you speak of exists, Investigator, and I shall consider your contentions. If you cannot, I shall dismiss all your fancies as ridiculous and we will move on.’

‘I can prove it.’ Botax’s colour-flashes turned intensely yellow-green. ‘The creatures of this world are unique in another way. They foresee advances they have not yet made, probably as a consequence of their belief in rapid change which, after all, they constantly witness. They therefore indulge in a type of literature involving the space-travel they have never developed. I have translated their term for the literature as “science-fiction”. Now I have dealt in my readings almost exclusively with science-fiction, for there I thought, in their dreams and fancies, they would expose themselves and their danger to us. And it was from that science-fiction that I deduced the method of their inter-form cooperation.’

‘How did you do that?’

‘There is a periodical on this world which sometimes publishes science-fiction which is, however, devoted almost entirely to the various aspects of the cooperation. It does not speak entirely freely, which is annoying, but persists in merely hinting. Its name as nearly as I can put it into flashes is “Recreationlad”. The creature in charge, I deduce, is interested in nothing but inter-form cooperation and searches for it everywhere with a systematic and scientific intensity that has roused my awe. He has found instances of cooperation described in science-fiction and I let material in his periodical guide me. From the stories he instanced I have learned how to bring it about.

‘And Captain, I beg of you, when the cooperation is accomplished and the young are brought forth before your eyes, give orders not to leave an atom of this world in existence.’

‘Well,’ said Captain Garm, wearily, ‘bring them into full consciousness and do what you must do quickly.’

Marge Skidmore was suddenly completely aware of her surroundings. She remembered very clearly the elevated station at the beginning of twilight. It had been almost empty, one man standing near her, another at the other end of the platform. The approaching train had just made itself known as a faint rumble in the distance.

There had then come the flash, a sense of turning inside out, the half-seen vision of a spindly creature, dripping mucus, a rushing upward, and now—

‘Oh, God,’ she said, shuddering. ‘It’s still here. And there’s another one, too.’

She felt a sick revulsion, but no fear. She was almost proud of herself for feeling no fear. The man next to her, standing quietly, but still wearing a battered fedora, was the one who had been near her on the platform.

‘They got you, too?’ she asked. ‘Who else?’

Charlie Grimwold, feeling flabby and paunchy, tried to lift his hand to remove his hat and smooth the thin hair that broke up but did not entirely cover the skin of his scalp and found that it moved only with difficulty against a rubbery but hardening resistance. He let his hand drop and looked morosely at the thin-faced woman facing him. She was in her middle thirties, he decided, and her hair was nice and her dress fit well, but at the moment, he just wanted to be somewhere else and it did him no good at all that he had company; even female company.

He said, ‘I don’t know, lady. I was just standing on the station platform.’

‘Me, too,’ Marge said quickly.

‘And then I see a flash. Didn’t hear nothing. Now here I am. Must be little men from Mars or Venus or one of them places.’

Marge nodded vigorously. ‘That’s what I figure. A flying saucer? You scared?’

‘No. That’s funny, you know. I think maybe I’m going nuts or I *would* be scared.’

‘Funny thing. I ain’t scared, either. Oh, God, here comes one of them now. If he touches me, I’m going to scream. Look at those wiggly hands. And that wrinkled skin, all slimy; makes me nauseous.’

Botax approached gingerly and said, in a voice at once rasping and screechy, this being the closest he could come to imitating the native timbre,

‘Creatures! We will not hurt you. But we must ask you if you would do us the favour of cooperating.’

‘Hey, it talks!’ said Charlie. ‘What do you mean, cooperate?’

‘Both of you. With each other,’ said Botax.

‘Oh?’ He looked at Marge. ‘You know what he means, lady?’

‘Ain’t got no idea whatsoever,’ she answered loftily.

Botax said, ‘What I mean—’ and he used the short term he had once heard employed as a synonym for the process.

Marge turned red and said, ‘What!’ in the loudest scream she could manage. Both Botax and Captain Garm put their hands over their mid-regions to cover the auditory patches that trembled painfully with the decibels.

Marge went on rapidly, and nearly incoherently. ‘Of all things. I’m a married woman, you. If my Ed was here, you’d hear from *him*. And you, wise guy,’ she twisted towards Charlie against rubbery resistance, ‘Whoever you are, if you think—’

‘Lady, lady,’ said Charlie in uncomfortable desperation. ‘It ain’t my idea. I mean, far be it from me, you know, to turn down some lady, you know; but me, I’m married, too. I got three kids. Listen—’

Captain Garm said, ‘What’s happening, Investigator Botax? These cacophonous sounds are awful.’

‘Well,’ Botax flashed a short purple patch of embarrassment. ‘This forms a complicated ritual. They are supposed to be reluctant at first. It heightens the subsequent result. After that initial stage, the skins must be removed.’

‘They have to be *skinned*?’

‘Not really skinned. Those are artificial skins that can be removed painlessly, and must be. Particularly in the smaller form.’

‘All right, then. Tell it to remove the skins. Really, Botax, I don’t find this pleasant.’

‘I don’t think I had better tell the smaller form to remove the skins. I think we had better follow the ritual closely. I have here sections of these space-travel tales which the man from the “Recreationlad” periodical spoke highly of. In those tales the skins are removed forcibly. Here is a description of an accident, for instance, “which played havoc with the girl’s dress, ripping it nearly off her slim body. For a second, he felt the warm firmness of her half-bared bosom against his cheek—” It goes on that way. You see, the ripping, the forcible removal, acts as a stimulus.’

‘Bosom?’ said the Captain. ‘I don’t recognise the flash.’

‘I invented that to cover the meaning. It refers to the bulges on the upper dorsal region of the smaller form.’

‘I see. Well, tell the larger one to rip the skins off the smaller one.—What a dismal thing this is.’

Botax turned to Charlie. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘rip the girl’s dress nearly off her slim body, will you? I will release you for the purpose.’

Marge’s eyes widened and she twisted towards Charlie in instant outrage. ‘Don’t you dare do that, you. Don’t you *dast* touch me, you sex maniac’

‘Me?’ said Charlie plaintively. ‘It ain’t my idea. You think I go around ripping dresses? Listen,’ he turned to Botax, ‘I got a wife and three kids. She finds out I go around ripping dresses, I get clobbered. You know what my wife does when I just look at some dame. *Listen—*’

‘Is he still reluctant?’ said the Captain, impatiently.

‘Apparently,’ said Botax. ‘The strange surroundings, you know, may be extending that stage of the cooperation. Since I know this is unpleasant for you, I will perform this stage of the ritual myself. It is frequently written in the space-travel tales that an outer-world species performs the task. For instance, here,’ and he riffled through his notes finding the one he wanted,

‘they describe a very awful such species. The creatures on the planet have foolish notions, you understand. It never occurs to them to imagine handsome individuals such as ourselves, with a fine mucous cover.’

‘Go on! Go on! Don’t take all day,’ said the Captain.

‘Yes, Captain. It says here that the extraterrestrial “came forward to where the girl stood. Shrieking hysterically, she was cradled in the monster’s embrace. Talons ripped blindly at her body, tearing the kirtle away in rags.” You see, the native creature is shrieking with stimulation as her skins are removed.’

‘Then go ahead, Botax, remove it. But please, allow no shrieking. I’m trembling all over with the sound waves.’

Botax said politely to Marge, ‘If you don’t mind—’

One spatulate finger made as though to hook on to the neck of the dress.

Marge wiggled desperately. ‘Don’t touch. Don’t touch! You’ll get slime on it. Listen, this dress cost \$24.95 at Ohrbach’s. Stay away, you monster. Look at those eyes on him.’ She was panting in her desperate efforts to dodge the groping, extraterrestrial hand. ‘A slimy, bug-eyed monster, that’s what he is. Listen, I’ll take it off myself. Just don’t touch it with slime, for God’s sake.’

She fumbled at the zipper, and said in a hot aside to Charlie, ‘Don’t you dast look.’

Charlie closed his eyes and shrugged in resignation.

She stepped out of the dress. ‘All right? You satisfied?’

Captain Garm’s fingers twitched with unhappiness. ‘Is that the bosom? Why does the other creature keep its head turned away?’

‘Reluctance. Reluctance,’ said Botax. ‘Besides, the bosom is still covered. Other skins must be removed. When bared, the bosom is a very strong stimulus. It is constantly described as ivory globes, or white spheres, or otherwise after that fashion. I have here drawings, visual picturisations, that

come from the outer covers of the space-travel magazines. If you will inspect them, you will see that upon every one of them, a creature is present with a bosom more or less exposed.'

The Captain looked thoughtfully from the illustrations to Marge and back. 'What is ivory?'

'That is another made-up flash of my own. It represents the tusky material of one of the large sub-intelligent creatures on the planet.'

'Ah,' and Captain Garm went into a pastel green of satisfaction. 'That explains it. This small creature is one of a warrior sect and those are tusks with which to smash the enemy.'

'No, no. They are quite soft, I understand.' Botax's small brown hand flicked outward in the general direction of the objects under discussion and Marge screamed and shrank away.

'Then what other purpose do they have?'

'I think,' said Botax with considerable hesitation, 'that they are used to feed the young.'

'The young eat them?' asked the Captain with every evidence of deep distress.

'Not exactly. The objects produce a fluid which the young consume.'

'Consume a fluid from a living body? Yech-h-h.' The Captain covered his head with all three of his arms, calling the central supernumerary into use for the purpose, slipping it out of its sheath so rapidly as almost to knock Botax over.

'A three-armed, slimy, bug-eyed monster,' said Marge.

'Yeah,' said Charlie.

'All right you, just watch those eyes. Keep them to yourself.'

‘Listen, lady. I’m trying not to look.’

Botax approached again. ‘Madam, would you remove the rest?’

Marge drew herself up as well as she could against the pinioning field. ‘Never!’

‘I’ll remove it, if you wish.’

‘Don’t touch! For God’s sake, don’t touch. Look at the slime on him, will you? All right, I’ll take it off.’ She was muttering under her breath and looking hotly in Charlie’s direction as she did so.

‘Nothing is happening,’ said the Captain, in deep dissatisfaction, ‘and this seems an imperfect specimen.’

Botax felt the slur on his own efficiency. ‘I brought you two perfect specimens. What’s wrong with the creature?’

‘The bosom does not consist of globes or spheres. I know what globes or spheres are and in these pictures you have shown me, they are so depicted. Those are large globes. On this creature, though, what we have are nothing but small flaps of dry tissue. And they’re discoloured, too, partly.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Botax. ‘You must allow room for natural variation. I will put it to the creature herself.’

He turned to Marge, ‘Madam, is your bosom imperfect?’

Marge’s eyes opened wide and she struggled vainly for moments without doing anything more than gasp loudly. ‘*Really!*’ she finally managed. ‘Maybe I’m no Gina Lollobrigida or Anita Ekberg, but I’m perfectly all right, thank you. Oh, boy, if my Ed were only here.’ She turned to Charlie. ‘Listen, you, you tell this bug-eyed slimy thing here, there ain’t nothing wrong with my development.’

‘Lady,’ said Charlie, softly. ‘I ain’t looking, remember?’

‘Oh, sure, you ain’t looking. You been peeking enough, so you might as well just open your crummy eyes and stick up for a lady, if you’re the least bit of a gentleman, which you probably ain’t.’

‘Well,’ said Charlie, looking sideways at Marge, who seized the opportunity to inhale and throw her shoulders back, ‘I don’t like to get mixed up in a kind of delicate matter like this, but you’re all right—I guess.’

‘You *guess*? You blind or something? I was once runner-up for Miss Brooklyn, in case you don’t happen to know and where I missed out was on waist-line, *not* on—’

Charlie said, ‘All right, all right. They’re fine. Honest.’ He nodded vigorously in Botax’s direction. ‘They’re okay. I ain’t that much of an expert, you understand, but they’re okay by me.’

Marge relaxed.

Botax felt relieved. He turned to Garm. ‘The bigger form expresses interest, Captain. The stimulus is working. Now for the final step.’

‘And what is that?’

‘There is no flash for it, Captain. Essentially, it consists of placing the speaking-and-eating apparatus of one against the equivalent apparatus of the other. I have made up a flash for the process, thus: kiss.’

‘Will nausea never cease?’ groaned the Captain.

‘It is the climax. In all the tales, after the skins are removed by force, they clasp each other with limbs and indulge madly in burning kisses, to translate as nearly as possible the phrase most frequently used. Here is one example, just one, taken at random: “He held the girl, his mouth avid on her lips.”’

‘Maybe one creature was devouring the other,’ said the Captain.

‘Not at all,’ said Botax impatiently. ‘Those were burning kisses.’

‘How do you mean, burning? Combustion takes place?’

‘I don’t think literally so. I imagine it is a way of expressing the fact that the temperature goes up. The higher the temperature, I suppose, the more successful the production of young. Now that the big form is properly stimulated, he need only place his mouth against hers to produce young. The young will not be produced without that step. It is the cooperation I have been speaking of.’

‘That’s all? Just this—’ The Captain’s hands made motions of coming together, but he could not bear to put the thought into flash form.

‘That’s all,’ said Botax. ‘In none of the tales, not even in “Recreationlad”, have I found a description of any further physical activity in connection with young-bearing. Sometimes after the kissing, they write a line of symbols like little stars, but I suppose that merely means more kissing; one kiss for each star, when they wish to produce a multitude of young.’

‘Just one, please, right now.’

‘Certainly, Captain.’

Botax said with grave distinctness, ‘Sir, would you kiss the lady?’

Charlie said, ‘Listen, I can’t move.’

‘I will free you, of course.’

‘The lady might not like it.’

Marge glowered. ‘You bet your damn boots, I won’t like it. You just stay away.’

‘I would like to, lady, but what do they do if I don’t? Look, I don’t want to get them mad. We can just—you know—make like a little peck.’

She hesitated, seeing the justice of the caution. ‘All right. No funny stuff, though. I ain’t in the habit of standing around like this in front of every Tom, Dick and Harry, you know.’

‘I know that, lady. It was none of my doing. You got to admit that.’

Marge muttered angrily, 'Regular slimy monsters. Must think they're some kind of gods or something, the way they order people around. Slime gods is what they are!'

Charlie approached her. 'If it's okay now, lady.' He made a vague motion as though to tip his hat. Then he put his hands awkwardly on her bare shoulders and leaned over in a gingerly pucker.

Marge's head stiffened so that lines appeared in her neck. Their lips met.

Captain Garm flashed fretfully. 'I sense no rise in temperature.' His heat-detecting tendril had risen to full extension at the top of his head and remained quivering there.

'I don't either,' said Botax, rather at a loss, 'but we're doing it just as the space travel stories tell us to. I think his limbs should be more extended—Ah, like that. See, it's working.'

Almost absently, Charlie's arm had slid around Marge's soft, nude torso. For a moment, Marge seemed to yield against him and then she suddenly writhed hard against the pinioning field that still held her with fair firmness.

'Let go.' The words were muffled against the pressure of Charlie's lips. She bit suddenly, and Charlie leaped away with a wild cry, holding his lower lip, then looking at his fingers for blood.

'What's the idea, lady?' he demanded plaintively.

She said, 'We agreed just a peck, is all. What were you starting there? What's going on around here? First these slimy creatures make like they're gods and now this. You some kind of playboy or something?'

Captain Garm flashed rapid alternations of blue and yellow. 'Is it done? How long do we wait now?'

'It seems to me it must happen at once. Throughout all the universe, when you have to bud, you bud, you know. There's no waiting.'

‘Yes? After thinking of the foul habits you have been describing, I don’t think I’ll ever bud again. Please get this over with.’

‘Just a moment, Captain.’

But the moments passed and the Captain’s flashes turned slowly to a brooding orange, while Botax’s nearly dimmed out altogether.

Botax finally asked hesitantly, ‘Pardon me, madam, but when will you bud?’

‘When will I *what?*’

‘Bear young?’

‘I’ve got a kid.’

‘I mean bear young now.’

‘I should say not. I ain’t ready for another kid yet.’

‘What? What?’ demanded the Captain. ‘What’s she saying?’

‘It seems,’ said Botax, weakly, ‘she does not intend to have young at the moment.’

The Captain’s colour patch blazed brightly. ‘Do you know what I think, Investigator? I think you have a sick, perverted mind. Nothing’s happening to these creatures. There is no cooperation between them, and no young to be borne. I think they’re two different species and that you’re playing some kind of foolish game with me.’

‘But Captain—’ said Botax.

‘Don’t “but Captain” me,’ said Garm. ‘I’ve had enough. You’ve upset me, turned my stomach, nauseated me, disgusted me with the whole notion of budding and wasted my time. You’re just looking for headlines and personal glory and I’ll see to it that you don’t get them. Get rid of these creatures now. Give that one its skins back and put them back where you found them. I ought

to take the expense of maintaining Time-stasis all this time out of your salary.'

'But, Captain—'

'Back, I say. Put them back in the same place and at the same instant of time. I want this planet untouched, and I'll see to it that it stays untouched.' He cast one more furious glance at Botax. 'One species, two forms, bosoms, kisses, cooperation, BAH—You are a fool, Investigator, a dolt as well and, most of all, a sick, sick, sick creature.'

There was no arguing. Botax, limbs trembling, set about returning the creatures.

They stood there at the elevated station, looking around wildly. It was twilight over them, and the approaching train was just making itself known as a faint rumble in the distance.

Marge said, hesitantly, 'Mister, did it really happen?'

Charlie nodded. 'I remember it. Listen. I'm sorry you was embarrassed. It was none of my doing. I mean, you know, lady, you wasn't really bad. In fact, you looked good, but I was kind of embarrassed to say that.'

She smiled. 'It's all right.'

'You want maybe to have a cup of coffee with me just to relax you. My wife, she's not really expecting me for a while.'

'Oh? Well, Ed's out of town and my little boy is visiting at my mother's. I don't have to rush home.'

'Come on, then. We been kind of introduced.'

'I'll say.' She laughed.

They had a couple of cocktails and then Charlie couldn't let her go home in the dark alone, so he saw her to her door. Marge was bound to invite him in for a few moments.

Meanwhile, back in the spaceship, the crushed Botax was making a final effort to prove his case. While Garm prepared the ship for departure Botax hastily set up the tight-beam visiscreen for a last look at his specimens. He focused in on Charlie and Marge in her apartment. His tendril stiffened and he began flashing in a coruscating rainbow of colours.

‘Captain Garm! Captain! Look what they’re doing now!’ But at that very instant the ship winked out of Time-stasis.

THERE'S A WOLF IN MY TIME MACHINE

Larry Niven

Time travel has been a popular theme in fantasy fiction since H. G. Wells' pioneer novel The Time Machine (1895), and remains so with television's evergreen Doctor Who. Many of the contributors to this volume have written short stories about men traversing time in remarkable machines, including 'All the Time in the World' by Arthur C. Clarke (1952) and 'The Waitabits' by Eric Frank Russell (1955), as well as full-length novels such as An Age by Brian Aldiss (1967) and Counter-Clock World by Philip K. Dick (1967). No writer, however, can have tackled the subject with greater invention and verve than Larry Niven, not to mention his frequent moments of comedy. His award-winning series 'Tales of Known Space', for example, contains an outstanding time travel story in World of Ptavvs (1966); while A World out of Time (1976) features the use of cryonics in a future society. There are elements of humour in several of Niven's other stories, but nowhere more openly than in his series about Hanville Svetz, 'the animal-hating time traveller' who first appeared in 'Get a Horse' in Fantasy and Science Fiction, October 1969, and became a firm favourite with readers after the publication of 'Bird In the Hand' the following year.

Laurence van Cott Niven (1938—), a Californian-born mathematics graduate, drew on his knowledge of technology for the early stories which made his reputation, in particular Ringworld (1970) which won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards in 1971. His particular skill lies in his invention of technological equipment that seems highly plausible—an 'organlegger' is one gadget, 'ramscoop' another—while his stories provide a mixture of complex plotting, vivid action and a wry humour directed at the foibles of human beings, which has earned him a worldwide audience. The Mote in God's Eye (1974) is also a highly regarded space opera about some unpleasant aliens on the loose in our galaxy.

Here, however, is one of Hanville Svetz's time travels, first published in June 1971, in which he, too, blunders into some unpleasant creatures in a land full of wolf men and late risers.

* * * *

The old extension cage had no fine controls, but that hardly mattered. It wasn't as if Svetz were chasing some particular extinct animal. Ra Chen had told him to take whatever came to hand.

Svetz guided the cage back to preindustrial America, somewhere in midcontinent, around 1000 AnteAtomic Era. Few humans, many animals. Perhaps he'd find a bison.

And when he pulled himself to the window, he looked out upon a vast white land.

Svetz had not planned to arrive in midwinter.

Briefly he considered moving into the time stream again and using the interrupter circuit. Try another date, try the luck again. But the interrupter circuit was new, untried, and Svetz wasn't about to be the first man to test it.

Besides which, a trip into the past cost over a million commercials. Using the interrupter circuit would nearly double that. Ra Chen would be displeased.

Svetz began freezing to death the moment he opened the door. From the doorway the view was all white, with one white bounding shape far away.

Svetz shot it with a crystal of soluble anaesthetic.

He used the flight stick to reach the spot. Now that it was no longer moving, the beast was hard to find. It was just the colour of the snow, but for its open red mouth and the black pads on its feet. Svetz tentatively identified it as an arctic wolf.

It would fit the Vivarium well enough. Svetz would have settled for anything that would let him leave this frozen wilderness. He felt uncommonly pleased with himself. A quick, easy mission.

Inside the cage, he rolled the sleeping beast into what might have been a clear plastic bag, and sealed it. He strapped the wolf against one curved wall

of the extension cage. He relaxed into the curve of the opposite wall as the cage surged in a direction vertical to all directions.

Gravity shifted oddly.

A transparent sac covered Svetz's own head. Its lip was fixed to the skin of his neck. Now Svetz pulled it loose and dropped it. The air system was on; he would not need the filter sac.

The wolf would. It could not breathe industrial-age air. Without the filter sac to remove the poisons, the wolf would choke to death. Wolves were extinct in Svetz's time.

Outside, time passed at a furious rate. Inside, time crawled. Nestled in the spherical curve of the extension cage, Svetz stared up at the wolf, who seemed fitted into the curve of the ceiling.

Svetz had never met a wolf in the flesh. He had seen pictures in children's books ... and even the children's books had been stolen from the deep past. Why should the wolf look so familiar?

It was a big beast, possibly as big as Hanville Svetz, who was a slender, small-boned man. Its sides heaved with its panting. Its tongue was long and red, and its teeth were white and sharp.

Like the dogs, Svetz remembered. The dogs in the Vivarium, in the glass case labelled:

DOG

Contemporary

Alone of the beasts in the Vivarium, the dogs were not sealed in glass for their own protection. The others could not breathe the air outside. The dogs could.

In a very real sense, they were the work of one man. Lawrence Wash Porter had lived near the end of the Industrial Period, between 50 and 100

PostAtomic Era, when billions of human beings were dying of lung diseases while scant millions adapted. Porter had decided to save the dogs.

Why the dogs? His motives were obscure, but his methods smacked of genius. He had acquired members of each of the breeds of dog in the world and bred them together over many generations of dogs and most of his own lifetime.

There would never be another dog show. Not a purebred dog was left in the world. But hybrid vigour had produced a new breed. These, the ultimate mongrels, could breathe industrial-age air, rich in oxides of carbon and nitrogen, scented with raw gasoline and sulphuric acid.

The dogs were behind glass because people were afraid of them. Too many species had died. The people of 1100 Post Atomic were not used to animals.

Wolves and dogs...could one have sired the other?

Svetz looked up at the sleeping wolf and wondered. He was both like and unlike the dogs. The dogs had grinned out through the glass and wagged their tails when children waved. Dogs liked people. But the wolf, even in sleep ...

Svetz shuddered. Of all the things he hated about his profession, this was the worst: the ride home, staring up at a strange and dangerous extinct animal. The first time he'd done it, a captured horse had seriously damaged the control panel. On his last mission an ostrich had kicked him and broken three ribs.

The wolf was stirring restlessly...and something about it had changed.

Something was changing now. The beast's snout was shorter, wasn't it? Its forelegs lengthened peculiarly; its paws seemed to grow and spread.

Svetz caught his breath, and instantly forgot the wolf. Svetz was choking, dying. He snatched up his filter sac and threw himself at the controls.

Svetz stumbled out of the extension cage, took three steps, and collapsed. Behind him, invisible contaminants poured into the open air.

The sun was setting in banks of orange cloud.

Svetz lay where he had fallen, retching, fighting for air. There was an outdoor carpet beneath him, green and damp, smelling of plants. Svetz did not recognise the smell, did not at once realise that the carpet was alive. He would not have cared at that point. He knew only that the cage's air system had tried to kill him. The way he felt, it had probably succeeded.

It had been a near thing. He had been passing 30 PostAtomic when the air went bad. He remembered clutching the interrupter switch, then waiting, waiting. The foul air stank in his nostrils and caught in his throat and tore at his larynx. He had waited through twenty years, feeling every second of them. At 50 PostAtomic he had pulled the interrupter switch and run choking from the cage.

50 PA. At least he had reached industrial times. He could breathe the air.

It was the horse, he thought without surprise. The horse had pushed its wickedly pointed horn through Svetz's control panel, three years ago. Maintenance was supposed to fix it. They *had* fixed it.

Something must have worn through.

The way he looked at me every time I passed his cage, I always knew the horse would get me, Svetz thought.

He noticed the filter sac still in his hand. Not that he'd be—

Svetz sat up suddenly.

There was green all about him. The damp green carpet beneath him was alive; it grew from the black ground. A rough, twisted pillar thrust from the ground, branched into an explosion of red and yellow papery things. More of the crumpled coloured paper lay about the pillar's base. Something that was not an aircraft moved erratically overhead, a tiny thing that fluttered and warbled.

Living, all of it. A preindustrial wilderness.

Svetz pulled the filter sac over his head and hurriedly smoothed the edges around his neck to form a seal. Blind luck that he hadn't fainted yet. He waited for it to puff up around his head. A selectively permeable membrane, it would pass the right gases in and out until the composition of the air was—was—

Svetz was choking, tearing at the sac.

He wadded it up and threw it, sobbing. First the air plant, now the filter sac! Had someone wrecked them both? The inertial calendar too; he was at least a hundred years previous to 50 PostAtomic.

Someone had tried to kill him.

Svetz looked wildly about him. Uphill across a wide green carpet, he saw an angular vertical-sided formation painted in shades of faded green. It had to be artificial. There might be people there. He could—

No, he couldn't ask for help either. Who would believe him? How could they help him anyway? His only hope was the extension cage. And his time must be very short.

The extension cage rested a few yards away, the door a black circle on one curved side. The other side seemed to fade away into nothing. It was still attached to the rest of the time machine, in 1103 PA, along a direction eyes could not follow.

Svetz hesitated near the door. His only hope was to disable the air plant. Hold his breath, then—

The smell of contaminants was gone.

Svetz sniffed at the air. Yes, gone. The air plant had exhausted itself, drained its contaminants into the open air. No need to wreck it now. Svetz was sick with relief.

He climbed in.

He remembered the wolf when he saw the filter sac, torn and empty. Then he saw the intruder towering over him, the coarse thick hair, the yellow eyes glaring, the taloned hands spread wide to kill.

The land was dark. In the east a few stars showed, though the west was still deep red. Perfumes tinged the air. A full moon was rising.

Svetz staggered uphill, bleeding.

The house on the hill was big and old. Big as a city block, and two floors high. It sprawled out in all directions, as though a mad architect had built to a whim that changed moment by moment. There were wrought-iron railings on the upper-floor windows, and wrought-iron handles on the screens on both floors, all painted the same dusty shade of green. The screens were wood, painted a different shade of green. They were closed across every window. No light leaked through anywhere.

The door was built for someone twelve feet tall. The knob was huge. Svetz used both hands and put all his weight into it, and still it would not turn. He moaned. He looked for the lens of a peeper camera and could not find it. How would anyone know he was here? He couldn't find a doorbell either.

Perhaps there was nobody inside. No telling what this building was. It was far too big to be a family dwelling, too spread out to be a hotel or apartment house. Might it be a warehouse or a factory? Making or storing what?

Svetz looked back towards the extension cage. Dimly he caught the glow of the interior lights. He also saw something moving on the living green that carpeted the hill.

Pale forms, more than one.

Moving this way?

Svetz pounded on the door with his fists. Nothing. He noticed a golden metal thing, very ornate, high on the door. He touched it, pulled at it, let it go. It clanked.

He took it in both hands and slammed the knob against its base again and again. Rhythmic clanking sounds. Someone should hear it.

Something zipped past his ear and hit the door hard. Svetz spun around, eyes wild, and dodged a rock the size of his fist. The white shapes were nearer now. Bipedes, walking hunched.

They looked too human—or not human enough.

The door opened.

She was young, perhaps sixteen. Her skin was very pale, and her hair and brows were pure white, quite beautiful. Her garment covered her from neck to ankles, but left her arms bare. She seemed sleepy and angry as she pulled the door open—manually, and it was heavy, too. Then she saw Svetz.

‘Help me,’ said Svetz.

Her eyes went wide. Her ears moved too. She said something Svetz had trouble interpreting, for she spoke in ancient american.

‘What *are* you?’

Svetz couldn’t blame her. Even in good condition his clothes would not fit the period. But his blouse was ripped to the navel, and so was his skin. Four vertical parallel lines of blood ran down his face and chest.

Zeera had been coaching him in the american speech. Now he said carefully, ‘I am a traveller. An animal, a monster, has taken my vehicle away from me.’

Evidently the sense came through. ‘You poor man! What kind of animal?’

‘Like a man, but hairy all over, with a horrible face—and claws— claws—’

‘I see the marks they made.’

‘I don’t know how he got in. I—’ Svetz shuddered. No, he couldn’t tell her that. It was insane, utterly insane, this conviction that Svetz’s wolf had

become a bloodthirsty humanoid monster. 'He only hit me once. On the face. I could get him out with a weapon, I think. Have you a bazooka?'

'What a funny word! I don't think so. Come inside. Did the trolls bother you?' She took his arm and pulled him in and shut the door.

Trolls?

'You're a strange person,' the girl said, looking him over. 'You look strange, you smell strange, you move strangely. I did not know that there were people like you in the world. You must come from very far away.'

'Very,' said Svetz. He felt himself close to collapse. He was safe at last, safe inside. But why were the hairs on the back of his neck trying to stand upright?

He said, 'My name is Svetz. What's yours?'

'Wrona.' She smiled up at him, not afraid despite his strangeness... and he must look strange to her, for she surely looked strange to Hanville Svetz. Her skin was sheet white, and her rich white hair would better have fit a centenarian. Her nose, very broad and flat, would have disfigured an ordinary girl. Somehow it fit Wrona's face well enough; but her face was most odd, and her ears were too large, almost pointed, and her eyes were too far apart, and her grin stretched *way* back...and Svetz liked it. Her grin was curiosity and enjoyment, and was not a bit too wide. The firm pressure of her hand was friendly, reassuring. Though her fingernails were uncomfortably long and sharp.

'You should rest, Svetz,' she said. 'My parents will not be up for another hour, at least. Then they can decide how to help you. Come with me, I'll take you to a spare room.'

He followed her through a room dominated by a great rectangular table and a double row of high-backed chairs. There was a large microwave oven at one end, and beside it a platter of... red things. Roughly conical they were, each about the size of a strong man's upper arm, each with a dot of white in the big end. Svetz had no idea what they were; but he didn't like their colour. They seemed to be bleeding.

‘Oh,’ Wrona exclaimed. ‘I should have asked. Are you hungry?’

Svetz was, suddenly. ‘Have you dole yeast?’

‘Why, I don’t know the word. Are those dole yeast? They are all we have.’

‘We’d better forget it.’ Svetz’s stomach lurched at the thought of eating something that colour. Even if it turned out to be a plant.

Wrona was half supporting him by the time they reached the room. It was rectangular and luxuriously large. The bed was wide enough, but only six inches off the floor, and without coverings. She helped him down to it. ‘There’s a wash basin behind that door, if you find the strength. Best you rest, Svetz. In perhaps two hours I will call you.’

Svetz eased himself back. The room seemed to rotate. He heard her go out.

How strange she was. How odd he must look to her. A good thing she hadn’t called anyone to tend him. A doctor would notice the differences.

Svetz had never dreamed that primitives would be so different from his own people. During the thousand years between now and the present, there must have been massive adaptation to changes in air and water, to DDT and other compounds in foods, to extinction of food plants and meat animals until only dole yeast was left, to higher noise levels, less room for exercise, greater dependence on medicines. . . Well, why shouldn’t they be different? It was a wonder humanity had survived at all.

Wrona had not feared his strangeness, nor cringed from the scratches on his face and chest. She was only amused and interested. She had helped him without asking too many questions. He liked her for that.

He dozed.

Pain from deep scratches, stickiness in his clothes made his sleep restless. There were nightmares. Something big and shadowy, half man and half beast, reached far out to slash his face. Over and over. At some indeterminate time he woke completely, already trying to identify a musky, unfamiliar scent.

No use. He looked about him, at a strange room that seemed even stranger from floor level. High ceiling. One frosted globe, no brighter than a full moon, glowed so faintly that the room was all shadow. Wrought-iron bars across the windows; black night beyond.

A wonder he'd wakened at all. The preindustrial air should have killed him hours ago.

It had been a futz of a day, he thought. And he shied away from the memory of the thing in the extension cage. Snarling face, pointed ears, double row of pointed white teeth. The clawed hand reaching out, swiping down. The nightmare conviction that a wolf had turned into *that*.

It could not be. Animals did not change shape like that. Something must have got in while Svetz was fighting for air. Chased the wolf out, or killed it.

But there were legends of such things, weren't there? Two and three thousand years old and more, everywhere in the world, were the tales of men who could become beasts and vice versa.

Svetz sat up. Pain gripped his chest, then relaxed. He stood up carefully and made his way to the bathroom.

The spigots were not hard to solve. Svetz wet a cloth with warm water. He watched himself in the mirror, emerging from under the crusted blood. A pale, slender young man topped with thin blond hair...and an odd distortion of chin and forehead. That must be the mirror, he decided. Primitive workmanship. It might have been worse. Hadn't the first mirrors been two-dimensional?

A shrill whistle sounded outside his door. Svetz went to look, and found Wrona. 'Good, you're up,' she said. 'Father and Uncle Wrocky would like to see you.'

Svetz stepped into the hall, and again noticed the elusive musky scent. He followed Wrona down the dark hallway. Like his room, it was lit only by a single white frosted globe. Why would Wrona's people keep the house so dark? They had electricity.

And why were they all sleeping at sunset? With breakfast laid out and waiting ...

Wrona opened a door, gestured him in.

Svetz hesitated a step beyond the threshold. The room was as dark as the hallway. The musky scent was stronger here. He jumped when a hand closed on his upper arm—it felt wrong; there was hair on the palm; the hard nails made a circlet of pressure points—and a gravelly male voice boomed, ‘Come in, Mister Svetz. My daughter tells me you’re a traveller in need of help.’

In the dim light Svetz made out a man and a woman seated on backless chairs. Both had hair as white as Wrona’s, but the woman’s hair bore a broad black stripe. A second man urged Svetz towards another backless chair. He too bore black markings: a single black eyebrow, a black crescent around one ear.

And Wrona was just behind him. Svetz looked around at them all, seeing how alike they were, how different from Hanville Svetz.

The fear rose up in him like a strong drug. Svetz was a xenophobe.

They were all alike. Rich white hair and eyebrows, black markings. Narrow black fingernails. The broad flat noses and the wide, wide mouths, the sharp white conical teeth, the high, pointed ears that moved, the yellow eyes, the hairy palms.

Svetz dropped heavily onto the padded footstool.

One of the males noticed: the larger one, who was still standing. ‘It must be the heavier gravity,’ he guessed. ‘It’s true, isn’t it, Svetz? You’re from another world. Obviously you’re not quite a man. You told Wrona you were a traveller, but you didn’t say from how far away.’

‘Very far,’ Svetz said weakly. ‘From the future.’

The smaller male was jolted. 'The future? You're a time traveller?' His voice became a snarl. 'You're saying that we will evolve into something like you!'

Svetz cringed. 'No. Really.'

'I hope not. What, then?'

'I think I must have gone sidewise in time. You're descended from wolves, aren't you? Not apes. Wolves.'

'Yes, of course.'

The seated male was looking him over. 'Now that he mentions it, he does look much more like a troll than any man has a right to. No offence intended, Svetz.'

Svetz, surrounded by wolf men, tried to relax. And failed. 'What is a troll?'

Wrona perched on the edge of his stool. 'You must have seen them on the lawn. We keep about thirty.'

'Plains apes,' the smaller male supplied. 'Imported from Africa, sometime in the last century. They make good watch-beasts and meat animals. You have to be careful with them, though. They throw things.'

'Introductions,' the other said suddenly. 'Excuse our manners, Svetz. I'm Flakee Wrocky. This is my brother Flakee Worrel, and Brenda, his wife. My niece you know.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Svetz said hollowly.

'You say you slipped sideways in time?'

'I think so. A futz of a long way, too,' said Svetz. 'Marooned. Gods protect me. It must have been the horse—'

Wrocky broke in. 'Horse?'

‘The horse. Three years ago, a horse damaged my extension cage. It was supposed to be fixed. I suppose the repairs just wore through, and the cage slipped sideways in time instead of forward. Into a world where wolves evolved instead of *Homo habilis*. Gods know where I’m likely to wind up if I try to go back.’

Then he remembered. ‘At least you can help me there. Some kind of monster has taken over my extension cage.’

‘Extension cage?’

‘The part of the time machine that does the moving. You’ll help me evict the monster?’

‘Of course,’ said Worrel, at the same time that the other was saying, ‘I don’t think so. Bear with me, please, Worrel. Svetz, it would be a disservice to you if we chased the monster out of your extension cage. You would try to reach your own time, would you not?’

‘Futz, yes!’

‘But you would only get more and more lost. At least in our world you can eat the food and breathe the air. Yes, we grow food plants for the trolls; you can learn to eat them.’

‘You don’t understand. I can’t stay here. I’m a xenophobe!’

Wrocky frowned. His ears flicked forward enquiringly. ‘What?’

‘I’m afraid of intelligent beings who aren’t human. I can’t help it. It’s in my bones.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you’ll get used to us, Svetz.’

Svetz looked from one male to the other. It was obvious enough who was in charge. Wrocky’s voice was much louder and deeper than Worrel’s; he was bigger than the other man, and his white fur fell about his neck in a mane like a lion’s. Worrel was making no attempt to assert himself. As for the women, neither had spoken a word since Svetz entered the room.

Wrocky was emphatically the boss. And Wrocky didn't want Svetz to leave.

'You don't understand,' Svetz said desperately. 'The air—' He stopped.

'What about the air?'

'It should have killed me by now. A dozen times over. In fact, why hasn't it?' Odd enough that he'd ever stopped wondering about that. 'I must have adapted,' Svetz said half to himself. 'That's it. The cage passed too close to this line of history. My heredity changed. My lungs adapted to preindustrial air. Futz it! If I hadn't pulled the interrupter switch, I'd have adapted back!'

'Then you can breathe our air,' said Wrocky.

'I still don't understand it. Don't you have any industries?'

'Of course,' Worrel said in surprise.

'Internal-combustion cars and aircraft? Diesel trucks and ships? Chemical fertilisers, insect repellents—'

'No, none of that. Chemical fertilisers wash away, ruin the water. The only insect repellents I ever heard of smelled to high heaven. They never got beyond the experimental stage. Most of our vehicles are battery powered.'

'There *was* a fad for internal-combustion once,' said Wrocky. 'It didn't spread very far. They stank. The people inside didn't care, of course, because they were leaving the stink behind. At its peak there were over two hundred cars tootling around the city of Detroit, poisoning the air. Then one night the citizenry rose in a pack and tore all the cars to pieces. The owners too.'

Worrel said, 'I've always thought that men have more sensitive noses than trolls.'

'Wrona noticed my smell long before I noticed hers. Wrocky, this is getting us nowhere. I've *got* to go home. I seem to have adapted to the air, but there are other things. Foods: I've never eaten anything but dole yeast; everything else died out long ago. Bacteria.'

Wrocky shook his head. ‘Anywhere you go, Svetz, your broken time machine will only take you to more and more exotic environments. There must be a thousand ways the world could end. Suppose you stepped out into one of them? Or just passed near one?’

‘But—’

‘Here, on the other paw, you will be an honoured guest. Think of all the things you can teach us! You, who were born into a culture that builds time-travelling vehicles!’

So that was it. ‘Oh, no. You couldn’t use what I know,’ said Svetz. ‘I’m no mechanic. I couldn’t show you how to do anything. Besides, you’d hate the side effects. Too much of past civilisations was built on petrochemicals. And plastics. Burning plastics produces some of the strangest—’

‘But even the most extensive oil reserves could not last forever. You must have developed other power sources by your own time.’ Wrocky’s yellow eyes seemed to bore right through him. ‘Controlled hydrogen fusion?’

‘But I can’t tell you how it’s done!’ Svetz cried desperately. ‘I know nothing of plasma physics!’

‘Plasma physics? What are plasma physics?’

‘Using electromagnetic fields to manipulate ionised gases. You *must* have plasma physics.’

‘No, but I’m sure you can give us some valuable hints. Already we have fusion bombs. And so do the Europeans . . . but we can discuss that later.’ Wrocky stood up. His black nails made pressure points on Svetz’s arm. ‘Think it over, Svetz. Oh, and make yourself free of the house, and don’t go outside without an escort. The trolls, you know.’

Svetz left the room with his head whirling. The wolves would not let him leave.

‘Svetz, I’m glad you’re staying,’ Wrona chattered. ‘I like you. I’m sure you’ll like it here. Please let me show you over the house.’

Down the length of the hallway, one frosted globe burned dimly in the gloom, like a full moon transported indoors. Nocturnal, they were nocturnal.

Wolves.

‘I’m a xenophobe,’ he said. ‘I can’t help it. I was born that way.’

‘Oh, you’ll learn to like us. You like me a little already, don’t you, Svetz?’ She reached up to scratch him behind the ear. A thrill of pleasure ran through him, unexpectedly sharp, so that he half closed his eyes.

‘This way,’ she said.

‘Where are we going?’

‘I thought I’d show you some trolls. Svetz, are you really descended from trolls? I can’t believe it!’

‘I’ll tell you when I see them,’ said Svetz. He remembered the *Homo habilis* in the Vivarium. It had been a man, an Adviser, until the Secretary-General ordered him regressed.

They went through the dining room, and Svetz saw unmistakable bones on the plates. He shivered. His forebears had eaten meat; the trolls were brute animals here, whatever they might be in Svetz’s world—but Svetz shuddered. His thinking seemed turgid, his head felt thick. He had to get out of here.

‘If you think Uncle Wrocky’s tough, you should meet the European ambassador,’ said Wrona. ‘Perhaps you will.’

‘Does he come here?’

‘Sometimes.’ Wrona growled low in her throat. ‘I don’t like him. He’s a different species, Svetz. Here it was the wolves that evolved into men; at least that’s what our teacher tells us. In Europe it was something else.’

‘I don’t think Uncle Wrocky will let me meet him. Or even tell him about me.’ Svetz rubbed at his eyes.

‘You’re lucky. Herr Dracula smiles a lot and says nasty things in a polite voice. It takes you a minute to—Svetz! What’s wrong?’

Svetz groaned like a man in agony. ‘My eyes!’ He felt higher. ‘My forehead! I don’t have a forehead any more!’

‘I don’t understand.’

Svetz felt his face with his fingertips. His eyebrows were a caterpillar of hair on a thick, solid ridge of bone. From the brow ridge his forehead sloped back at forty-five degrees. And his chin, his chin was gone too. There was only a regular curve of jaw into neck.

‘I’m regressing. I’m turning into a troll,’ said Svetz. ‘Wrona, if I turn into a troll, will they eat me?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll stop them, Svetz!’

‘No. Take me down to the extension cage. If you’re not with me, the trolls will kill me.’

‘All right. But, Svetz, what about the monster?’

‘He should be easier to handle by now. It’ll be all right. Just take me there. Please.’

‘All right, Svetz.’ She took his hand and led him.

The mirror hadn’t lied. He’d been changing even then, adapting to this line of history. First his lungs had lost their adaptation to normal air. There had been no industrial age here. But there had been no *Homo sapiens* either ...

Wrona opened the door. Svetz sniffed at the night. His sense of smell had become preternaturally acute. He smelled the trolls before he saw them, coming uphill towards him across the living green carpet. Svetz’s fingers curled, wishing for a weapon.

Three of them. They formed a ring around Svetz and Wrona. One of them carried a length of white bone. They all walked upright on two legs, but they walked as if their feet hurt them. They were as hairless as men. Apes' heads mounted on men's bodies.

Homo habilis, the killer plains ape. Man's ancestor.

'Pay them no attention,' Wrona said offhandedly. 'They won't hurt us.' She started down the hill. Svetz followed closely.

'He really shouldn't have that bone,' she called back. 'We try to keep bones away from them. They use them as weapons. Sometimes they hurt each other. Once one of them got hold of the iron handle for the lawn sprinkler and killed a gardener with it.'

'I'm not going to take it away from him.'

'That glaring light, is that your extension cage?'

'Yes.'

'I'm not sure about this, Svetz.' She stopped suddenly. 'Uncle Wrocky's right. You'll only get more lost. Here you'll at least be taken care of.'

'No. Uncle Wrocky was wrong. See the dark side of the extension cage, how it fades away to nothing? It's still attached to the rest of the time machine. It'll just reel me in.'

'Oh.'

'No telling how long it's been veering across the time lines. Maybe ever since that futzy horse poked his futzy horn through the controls. Nobody ever noticed before. Why should they? Nobody ever stopped a time machine half-way before.'

'Svetz, horses don't have horns.'

'Mine does.'

There was noise behind them. Wrona looked back into a darkness Svetz's eyes could not pierce. 'Somebody must have noticed us! Come on, Svetz!'

She pulled him towards the lighted cage. They stopped just outside.

'My head feels thick,' Svetz mumbled. 'My tongue too.'

'What are we going to do about the monster? I can't hear anything—'

'No monster. Just a man with amnesia, now. He was only dangerous in the transition stage.'

She looked in. 'Why, you're right! Sir, would you mind—Svetz, he doesn't seem to understand me.'

'Sure not. Why should he? He thinks he's a white arctic wolf.' Svetz stepped inside. The white-haired wolf man was backed into a corner, warily watching. He looked a lot like Wrona.

Svetz became aware that he had picked up a tree branch. His hand must have done it without telling his brain. He circled, holding the weapon ready. An unreasoning rage built up and up in him. Invader! The man had no business here in Svetz's territory.

The wolf man backed away, his slant eyes mad and frightened. Suddenly he was out of the door and running, the trolls close behind.

'Your father can teach him, maybe,' said Svetz.

Wrona was studying the controls. 'How do you work it?'

'Let me see. I'm not sure I remember.' Svetz rubbed at his drastically sloping forehead. 'That one closes the door—'

Wrona pushed it. The door closed.

'Shouldn't you be outside?'

'I want to come with you,' said Wrona.

‘Oh.’ It was getting terribly difficult to think. Svetz looked over the control panel. Eeny, meeny—that one? Svetz pulled it.

Free fall. Wrona yipped. Gravity came, vectored radially outwards from the centre of the extension cage. It pulled them against the walls.

‘When my lungs go back to normal, I’ll probably go to sleep,’ said Svetz. ‘Don’t worry about it.’ Was there something else he ought to tell Wrona? He tried to remember.

Oh, yes. ‘You can’t go home again,’ said Svetz. ‘We’d never find this line of history again.’

‘I want to stay with you,’ said Wrona.

‘All right.’

* * * *

Within a deep recess in the bulk of the time machine, a fog formed. It congealed abruptly—and Svetz’s extension cage was back, hours late. The door popped open automatically. But Svetz didn’t come out.

They had to pull him out by the shoulders, out of air that smelled of beast and honeysuckle.

‘He’ll be all right in a minute. Get a filter tent over that other thing,’ Ra Chen ordered. He stood over Svetz with his arms folded, waiting.

Svetz began breathing.

He opened his eyes.

‘All right,’ said Ra Chen. ‘What happened?’

Svetz sat up. ‘Let me think. I went back to preindustrial America. It was all snowed in. I ... shot a wolf.’

‘We’ve got it in a tent. Then what?’

‘No. The wolf left. We chased him out.’ Svetz’s eyes went wide. ‘Wrona!’

Wrona lay on her side in the filter tent. Her fur was thick and rich, white with black markings. She was built something like a wolf, but more compactly, with a big head and a short muzzle and a tightly curled tail. Her eyes were closed. She did not seem to be breathing.

Svetz knelt. ‘Help me get her out of there! Can’t you tell the difference between a wolf and a dog?’

‘No. Why would you bring back a dog, Svetz? We’ve got dozens of dogs.’

Svetz wasn’t listening. He pulled away the filter tent and bent over Wrona. ‘I think she’s a dog. More dog than wolf, anyway. People tend to domesticate each other. She’s adapted to our line of history. And our brand of air.’ Svetz looked up at his boss. ‘Sir, we’ll have to junk the old extension cage. It’s been veering sideways in time.’

‘Have you been eating gunchy pills on the job?’

‘I’ll tell you all about it—’

Wrona opened her eyes. She looked about her in rising panic until she found Svetz. She looked up at him, her golden eyes questioning.

‘I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry,’ Svetz told her. He scratched her behind the ear, his fingertips deep in soft fur. To Ra Chen he said, ‘The Vivarium doesn’t need any more dogs. She can stay with me.’

‘Are you crazy, Svetz? You, live with an animal? You hate animals!’

‘She saved my life. I won’t let anyone put her in a cage,’ he said determinedly.

‘Sure, keep it! Live with it! I don’t suppose you plan to pay back the two million commercials she cost us? I thought not.’ Ra Chen made a disgusted sound. ‘All right, let’s have your report. And keep that thing under control, will you?’

Wrona raised her nose and sniffed at the air. Then she howled. The sound echoed within the Institute, and heads turned in questioning and fear.

Puzzled, Svetz imitated the gesture, and understood.

The air was rich with petrochemicals and oxides of carbon and nitrogen and sulphur. Industrial air, the air Svetz had breathed all his life.

And Svetz hated it.

2BRO2B

Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

*A man who has written with such black humour about the future and with such irony concerning the possibility of the end of the world is probably the ideal contributor to close a volume of comic fantasy. The fact that the career of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has curious parallels with that of the first contributor, Terry Pratchett, makes him even more apt in the light of the absurdist styles which both have developed quite independently. Vonnegut worked as a public relations man with the General Electric Company in America, became famous with *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), a novel about a quirky alien nation called the Tralfamadorians and the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, and now has a huge following of admirers extending far beyond the realms of fantasy fiction. His books are also full of the same kind of comic invention as Pratchett's. Yet this is certainly the first time that these two undisputed masters of the genre have appeared together in the pages of the same book.*

*Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922—) was born in Indianapolis where his father and paternal grandfather were architects. 'Somewhere in Germany', he writes, 'is a stream called the Vonne—that is the source of my curious name.' It was immediately after his employment with the General Electric Company that he began to develop his unique brand of fantasy in magazines such as *Fantasy* and *Science Fiction*, *Galaxy* and *Worlds of If*. Later he wrote the novels that earned him cult status, including *Player Piano* (1952), in which machines take over the world; *Cat's Cradle* (1963), featuring Bokkonon, the inventor of a religion consisting entirely of lies; *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), in which the Tralfamadorians reappear; and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), about a Science Fiction writer, Kilgore Trout, whose absurdist fantasy stories appear as the text in books of pornographic pictures.*

*A major selection of Vonnegut's short stories has been published as *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1969), but here is a rare early item that first appeared in *Worlds of If* in January 1962. '2 B R O 2 B' concerns life*

and death in the future, and Vonnegut's vision of it, with his dark humour, provides a perfect finale.

* * * *

Everything was perfect.

There were no prisons, no slums, no insane asylums, no cripples, no poverty, no wars.

All diseases were conquered. So was old age.

Death, barring accidents, was an adventure for volunteers.

The population of the United States was stabilised at forty million souls.

One bright morning in the Chicago Lying-in Hospital, a man named Edward K. Wehling, Jr., waited for his wife to give birth. He was the only man waiting. Not many people were born a day any more.

Wehling was fifty-six, a mere stripling in a population whose average age was one hundred and twenty-nine.

X-rays had revealed that his wife was going to have triplets. The children would be his first.

Young Wehling was hunched in his chair, his head in his hand. He was so rumpled, so still and colourless as to be virtually invisible. His camouflage was perfect, since the waiting room had a disorderly and demoralised air, too. Chairs and ashtrays had been moved away from the walls. The floor was paved with spattered dropcloths.

The room was being redecorated. It was being redecorated as a memorial to a man who had volunteered to die.

A sardonic old man, about two hundred years old, sat on a stepladder, painting a mural he did not like. Back in the days when people aged visibly, his age would have been guessed at thirty-five or so. Ageing had touched him that much before the cure for ageing was found.

The mural he was working on depicted a very neat garden. Men and women in white, doctors and nurses, turned the soil, planted seedlings, sprayed bugs, spread fertiliser.

Men and women in purple uniforms pulled up weeds, cut down plants that were old and sickly, raked leaves, carried refuse to trash-burners.

Never, never, never—not even in medieval Holland or old Japan—had a garden been more formal, been better tended. Every plant had all the loam, light, water, air and nourishment it could use.

A hospital orderly came down the corridor, singing under his breath a popular song:

If you don't like my kisses, honey,

Here's what I will do:

I'll go see a girl in purple,

Kiss this sad world toodle-oo.

If you don't want my lovin',

Why should I take up all this space?

I'll get off this old planet,

Let some sweet baby have my place.

The orderly looked in at the mural and the muralist. 'Looks so real,' he said, 'I can practically imagine I'm standing in the middle of it.'

'What makes you think you're not in it?' said the painter. He gave a satiric smile. 'It's called "The Happy Garden of Life", you know.'

'That's good of Dr Hitz,' said the orderly.

He was referring to one of the male figures in white, whose head was a portrait of Dr Benjamin Hitz, the hospital's Chief Obstetrician. Hitz was a blindingly handsome man.

'Lot of faces still to fill in,' said the orderly. He meant that the faces of many of the figures in the mural were still blank. All blanks were to be filled with portraits of important people on either the hospital staff or from the Chicago Office of the Federal Bureau of Termination.

'Must be nice to be able to make pictures that look like something,' said the orderly.

The painter's face curdled with scorn. 'You think I'm proud of this daub?' he said. 'You think this is my idea of what life really looks like?'

'What's your idea of what life looks like?' said the orderly.

The painter gestured at a foul dropcloth. 'There's a good picture of it,' he said. 'Frame that, and you'll have a picture a damn sight more honest than this one.'

'You're a gloomy old duck, aren't you?' said the orderly.

'Is that a crime?' said the painter.

The orderly shrugged. 'If you don't like it here, Grandpa—' he said, and he finished the thought with the trick telephone number that people who didn't want to live any more were supposed to call. The zero in the telephone number he pronounced 'naught'.

The number was: '2BRO2B.'

It was the telephone number of an institution whose fanciful sobriquets included: 'Automat', 'Birdland', 'Cannery', 'Catbox', 'De-louser', 'Easy-go', 'Good-bye, Mother', 'Happy Hooligan', 'Kiss-me-quick', 'Lucky Pierre', 'Sheepdip', 'Waring Blendor', 'Weep-no-more' and 'Why Worry?'

'To be or not to be' was the telephone number of the municipal gas chambers of the Federal Bureau of Termination.

The painter thumbed his nose at the orderly. 'When I decide it's time to go,' he said, 'it won't be at the Sheepdip.'

'A do-it-yourselfer, eh?' said the orderly. 'Messy business, Grandpa. Why don't you have a little consideration for the people who have to clean up after you?'

The painter expressed with an obscenity his lack of concern for the tribulations of his survivors. 'The world could do with a good deal more mess, if you ask me,' he said.

The orderly laughed and moved on.

Wehling, the waiting father, mumbled something without raising his head. And then he fell silent again.

A coarse, formidable woman strode into the waiting room on spike heels. Her shoes, stockings, trench coat, bag and overseas cap were all purple, the purple the painter called 'the colour of grapes on Judgement Day'.

The medallion on her purple musette bag was the seal of the Service Division of the Federal Bureau of Termination, an eagle perched on a turnstile.

The woman had a lot of facial hair—an unmistakable moustache, in fact. A curious thing about gas-chamber hostesses was that, no matter how lovely and feminine they were when recruited, they all sprouted moustaches within five years or so.

'Is this where I'm supposed to come?' she said to the painter.

'A lot would depend on what your business was,' he said. 'You aren't about to have a baby, are you?'

'They told me I was supposed to pose for some picture,' she said. 'My name's Leora Duncan.' She waited.

'And you dunk people,' he said.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Skip it,’ he said.

‘That sure is a beautiful picture,’ she said. ‘Looks just like heaven or something.’

‘Or something,’ said the painter. He took a list of names from his smock pocket. ‘Duncan, Duncan, Duncan,’ he said, scanning the list. ‘Yes—here you are. You’re entitled to be immortalised. See any faceless body here you’d like me to stick your head on? We’ve got a few choice ones left.’

She studied the mural bleakly. ‘Gee,’ she said, ‘they’re all the same to me. I don’t know anything about art.’

‘A body’s a body, eh?’ he said. ‘All righty. As a master of fine art, I recommend this body here.’ He indicated a faceless figure of a woman who was carrying dried stalks to a trash-burner.

‘Well,’ said Leora Duncan, ‘that’s more the disposal people, isn’t it? I mean, I’m in service. I don’t do any disposing.’

The painter clapped his hands in mock delight. ‘You say you don’t know anything about art, and then you prove in the next breath that you know more about it than I do! Of course the sheave-carrier is wrong for a hostess! A snipper, a pruner—that’s more your line.’ He pointed to a figure in purple who was sawing a dead branch from an apple tree. ‘How about her?’ he said. ‘You like her at all?’

‘Gosh—’ she said, and she blushed and became humble—’that— that puts me right next to Dr Hitz.’

‘That upsets you?’ he said.

‘Good gravy, no!’ she said. ‘It’s—it’s just such an honour.’

‘Ah. You admire him, eh?’ he said.

‘Who doesn’t admire him?’ she said, worshipping the portrait of Hitz. It was the portrait of a tanned, white-haired, omnipotent Zeus, two hundred and forty years old. ‘Who doesn’t admire him?’ she said again. ‘He was responsible for setting up the very first gas chamber in Chicago.’

‘Nothing would please me more,’ said the painter, ‘than to put you next to him for all time. Sawing off a limb—that strikes you as appropriate?’

‘That is kind of like what I do,’ she said. She was demure about what she did. What she did was make people comfortable while she killed them.

* * * *

And, while Leora Duncan was posing for her portrait, into the waiting-room bounded Dr Hitz himself. He was seven feet tall, and he boomed with importance, accomplishments, and the joy of living.

‘Well, Miss Duncan! Miss Duncan!’ he said, and he made a joke. ‘What are you doing here?’ he said. ‘This isn’t where the people leave. This is where they come in!’

‘We’re going to be in the same picture together,’ she said shyly.

‘Good!’ said Dr Hitz heartily. ‘And, say, isn’t that some picture?’

‘I sure am honoured to be in it with you,’ she said.

‘Let me tell you,’ he said, ‘I’m honoured to be in it with you. Without women like you, this wonderful world we’ve got wouldn’t be possible.’

He saluted her and moved towards the door that led to the delivery rooms. ‘Guess what was just born,’ he said.

‘I can’t,’ she said.

‘Triplets!’ he said.

‘Triplets!’ she said. She was exclaiming over the legal implications of triplets.

The law said that no new-born child could survive unless the parents of the child could find someone who would volunteer to die. Triplets, if they were all to live, called for three volunteers.

‘Do the parents have three volunteers?’ said Leora Duncan.

‘Last I heard,’ said Dr Hitz, ‘they had one, and were trying to scrape another two up.’

‘I don’t think they made it,’ she said. ‘Nobody made three appointments with us. Nothing but singles going through today, unless somebody called in after I left. What’s the name?’

‘Wehling,’ said the waiting father, sitting up, red-eyed and frowzy. ‘Edward K. Wehling, Jr., is the name of the happy father-to-be.’

He raised his right hand, looked at a spot on the wall, gave a hoarsely wretched chuckle. ‘Present,’ he said.

‘Oh, Mr Wehling,’ said Dr Hitz, ‘I didn’t see you.’

‘The invisible man,’ said Wehling.

‘They just phoned me that your triplets have been born,’ said Dr Hitz. ‘They’re all fine, and so is the mother. I’m on my way in to see them now.’

‘Hooray,’ said Wehling emptily.

‘You don’t sound very happy,’ said Dr Hitz.

‘What man in my shoes wouldn’t be happy?’ said Wehling. He gestured with his hands to symbolise carefree simplicity. ‘All I have to do is pick out which one of the triplets is going to live, then deliver my maternal grandfather to the Happy Hooligan, and come back here with a receipt.’

Dr Hitz became rather severe with Wehling, towered over him. ‘You don’t believe in population control, Mr Wehling?’ he said.

‘I think it’s perfectly keen,’ said Wehling tautly.

‘Would you like to go back to the good old days, when the population of the Earth was twenty billion—about to become forty billion, then eighty billion, then one hundred and sixty billion? Do you know what a drupelet is, Mr Wehling?’ said Hitz.

‘Nope,’ said Wehling sulkily.

‘A drupelet, Mr Wehling, is one of the little knobs, one of the little pulpy grains of a blackberry,’ said Dr Hitz. ‘Without population control, human beings would now be packed on the surface of this old planet like drupelets on a blackberry! Think of it!’

Wehling continued to stare at the same spot on the wall.

‘In the year 2000,’ said Dr Hitz, ‘before scientists stepped in and laid down the law, there wasn’t even enough drinking water to go round, and nothing to eat but seaweed—and still people insisted on their right to reproduce like jackrabbits. And their right, if possible, to live forever.’

‘I want those kids,’ said Wehling quietly. ‘I want all three of them.’

‘Of course you do,’ said Dr Hitz. ‘That’s only human.’

‘I don’t want my grandfather to die, either,’ said Wehling.

‘Nobody’s really happy about taking a close relative to the Catbox,’ said Dr Hitz gently, sympathetically.

‘I wish people wouldn’t call it that,’ said Leora Duncan.

‘What?’ said Dr Hitz.

‘I wish people wouldn’t call it “the Catbox”, and things like that,’ she said. ‘It gives people the wrong impression.’

‘You’re absolutely right,’ said Dr Hitz. ‘Forgive me.’ He corrected himself, gave the municipal gas chambers their official title, a title no one ever used in conversation. ‘I should have said, “Ethical Suicide Studios”,’ he said.

‘That sounds so much better,’ said Leora Duncan.

‘This child of yours—whichever one you decide to keep, Mr Wehling,’ said Dr Hitz. ‘He or she is going to live on a happy, roomy, clean, rich planet, thanks to population control. In a garden like that mural there.’ He shook his head. ‘Two centuries ago, when I was a young man, it was a hell that nobody thought could last another twenty years. Now centuries of peace and plenty stretch before us as far as the imagination cares to travel.’

He smiled luminously.

The smile faded as he saw that Wehling had just drawn a revolver.

Wehling shot Dr Hitz dead. ‘There’s room for one—a great big one,’ he said.

And then he shot Leora Duncan. ‘It’s only death,’ he said to her as she fell. ‘There! Room for two.’

And then he shot himself, making room for all three of his children.

Nobody came running. Nobody, seemingly, heard the shots.

The painter sat on the top of his stepladder, looking down reflectively on the sorry scene.

The painter pondered the mournful puzzle of life demanding to be born and, once born, demanding to be fruitful...to multiply and to live as long as possible—to do all that on a very small planet that would have to last forever.

All the answers that the painter could think of were grim. Even grimmer, surely, than a Catbox, a Happy Hooligan, an Easy Go. He thought of war. He thought of plague. He thought of starvation.

He knew that he would never paint again. He let his paintbrush fall to the dropcloths below. And then he decided he had had about enough of life in the Happy Garden of Life, too, and he came slowly down from the ladder.

He took Wehling’s pistol, really intending to shoot himself.

But he didn't have the nerve.

And then he saw the telephone booth in the corner of the room. He went to it, dialled the well-remembered number: '2 B R O 2 B'.

'Federal Bureau of Termination,' said the very warm voice of a hostess.

'How soon could I get an appointment?' he asked, speaking very carefully.

'We could probably fit you in late this afternoon, sir,' she said. 'It might even be earlier, if we get a cancellation.'

'All right,' said the painter, 'fit me in, if you please.' And he gave her his name, spelling it out.

'Thank you, sir,' said the hostess. 'Your city thanks you; your country thanks you; your planet thanks you. But the deepest thanks of all are from future generations.'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editor would like to record his thanks to Colin Smythe and Maggie Phillips and to acknowledge the special assistance he received from the late Robert Bloch in the compiling of this collection. He and the publishers are also grateful to the following authors, their publishers and agents for permission to include copyright stories in the book: Colin Smythe Limited for 'Theatre of Cruelty' Copyright © 1993 and 1996 by Terry Pratchett; A. P. Watt Literary Agency for 'How Nuth Would Have Practised his Art Upon the Gnoles' by Lord Dunsany and 'The Wild Asses of the Devil' by H. G. Wells; Alfred A. Knopf for 'Hell Hath No Fury' by John Collier; E. J. Carnell Literary Agency for 'A Great Deal of Power' by Eric Frank Russell and 'The Bait' by Fritz Leiber; Scott Meredith Literary Agency for 'The Twonky' by Henry Kuttner, 'Not By Its Cover' by Philip K. Dick and 'Captain Wyxtpthll's Flying Saucer' by Arthur C. Clarke; Abner Stein Ltd for 'Doodad' by Ray Bradbury; Ziff-Davis Publishing Company for 'The Rule of Names' by Ursula K. Le Guin and 'Playboy and the Slime God' by Isaac Asimov; Mercury Press, Inc. for 'Mythological Beast' by Stephen Donaldson, 'The Gnurrs Come from the Voodvork Out' by Reginald Bretnor and 'There's A Wolf in my Time Machine' by Larry Niven; Random Publishing Group for 'Affairs in Poictesme' by James Branch Cabell; Elizabeth C. Brown for 'The Ring of Hans Carvel' by Fredric Brown; A. M. Heath Literary Agency for 'A Good Knight's Work' by Robert Bloch; Curtis Brown Literary Agency for 'Poor Little Warrior' by Brian Aldiss; Terminus Publishing Company, Inc. for 'The Odd Old Bird' by Avram Davidson; Ed Victor Ltd and Completely Unexpected Productions Ltd for 'Young Zaphod Plays It Safe' by Douglas Adams; the Estate of C. S. Lewis for 'Ministering Angels' by C. S. Lewis; Digest Productions Corporation for '2 B R O 2 B' by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. The illustrations in this collection are all from the pages